



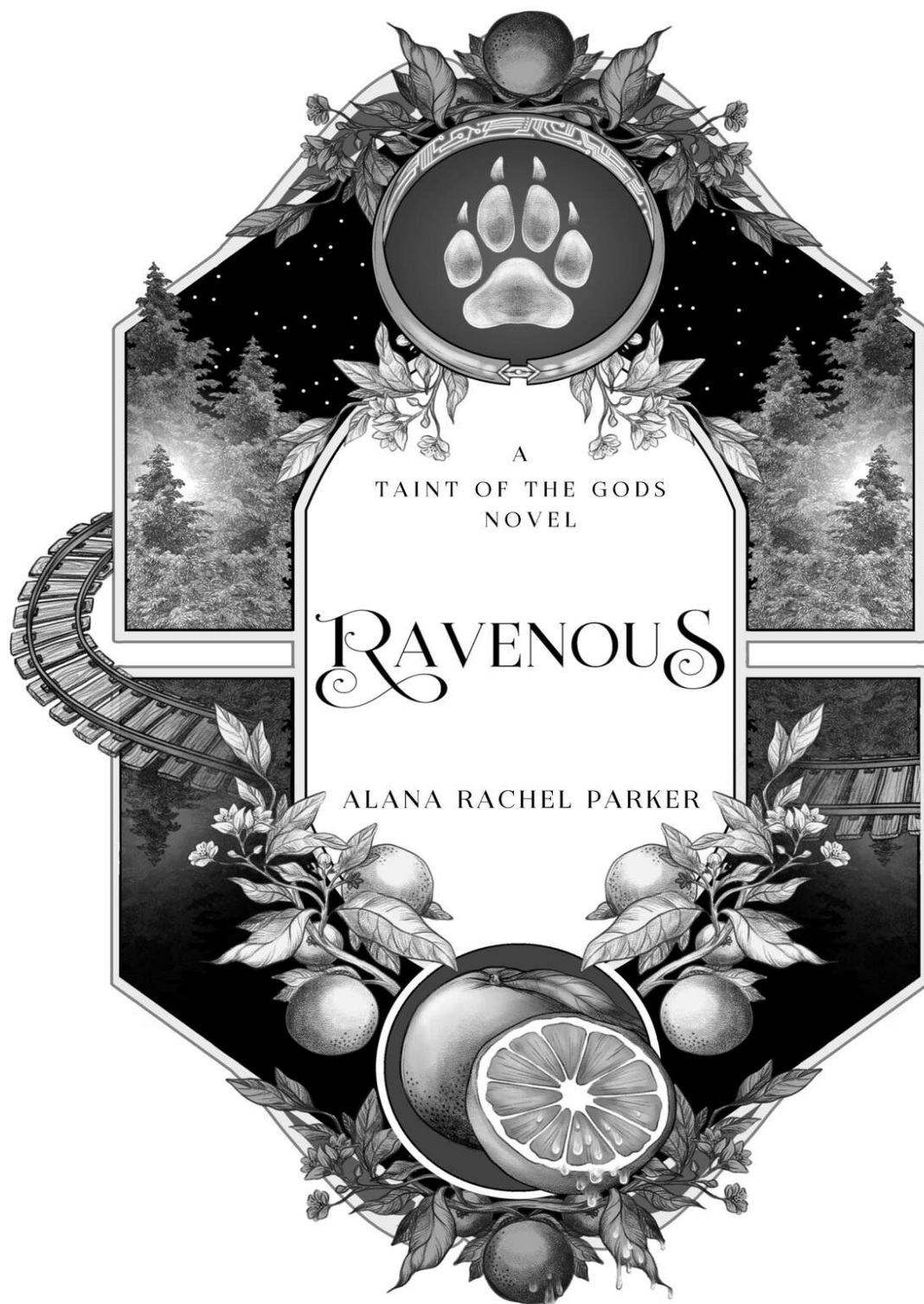
FREEDOM IS A HUNGER NOT EASILY QUENCHED

# RAVENOUS

A  
TAINT OF THE GODS  
NOVEL

ALANA RACHEL PARKER





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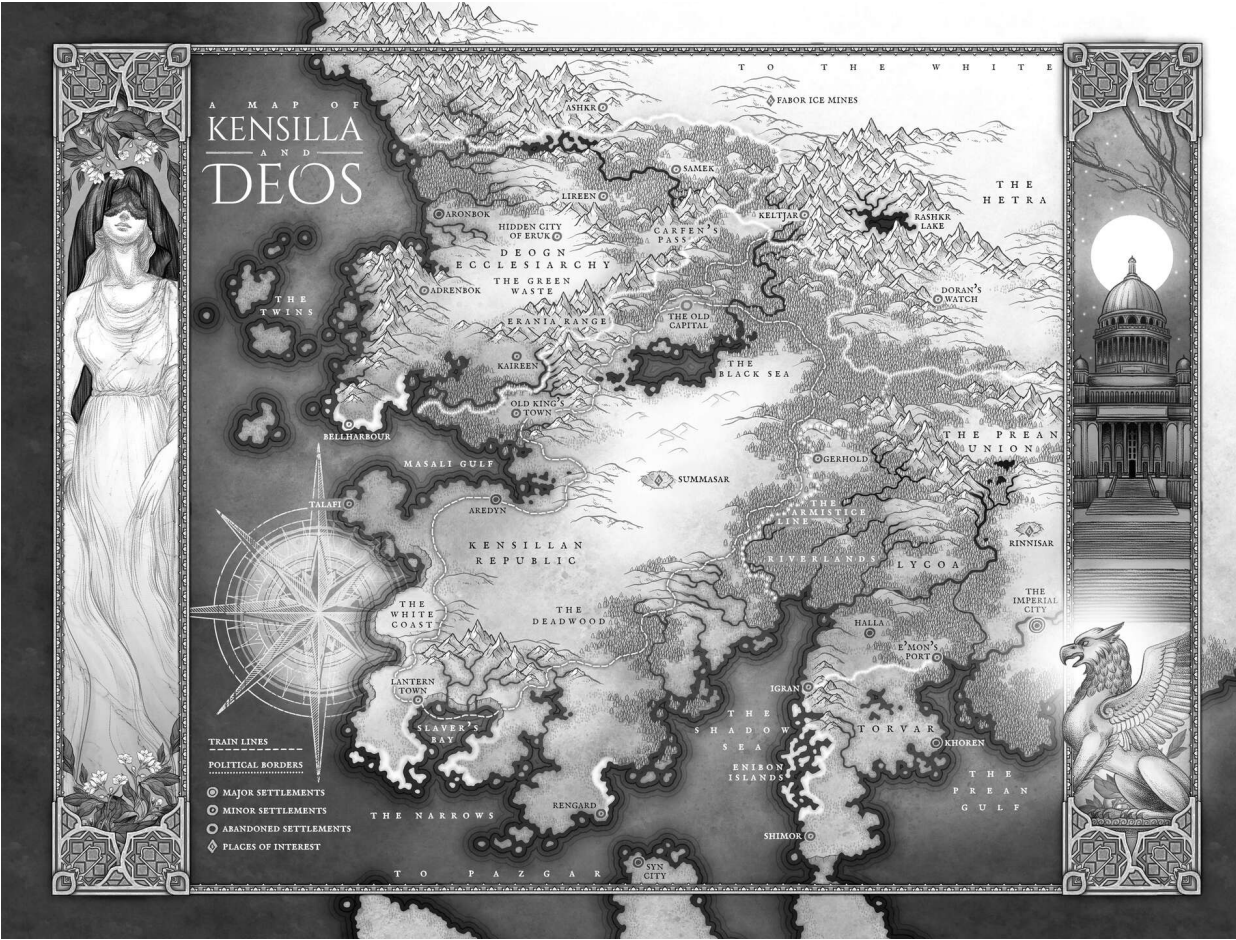
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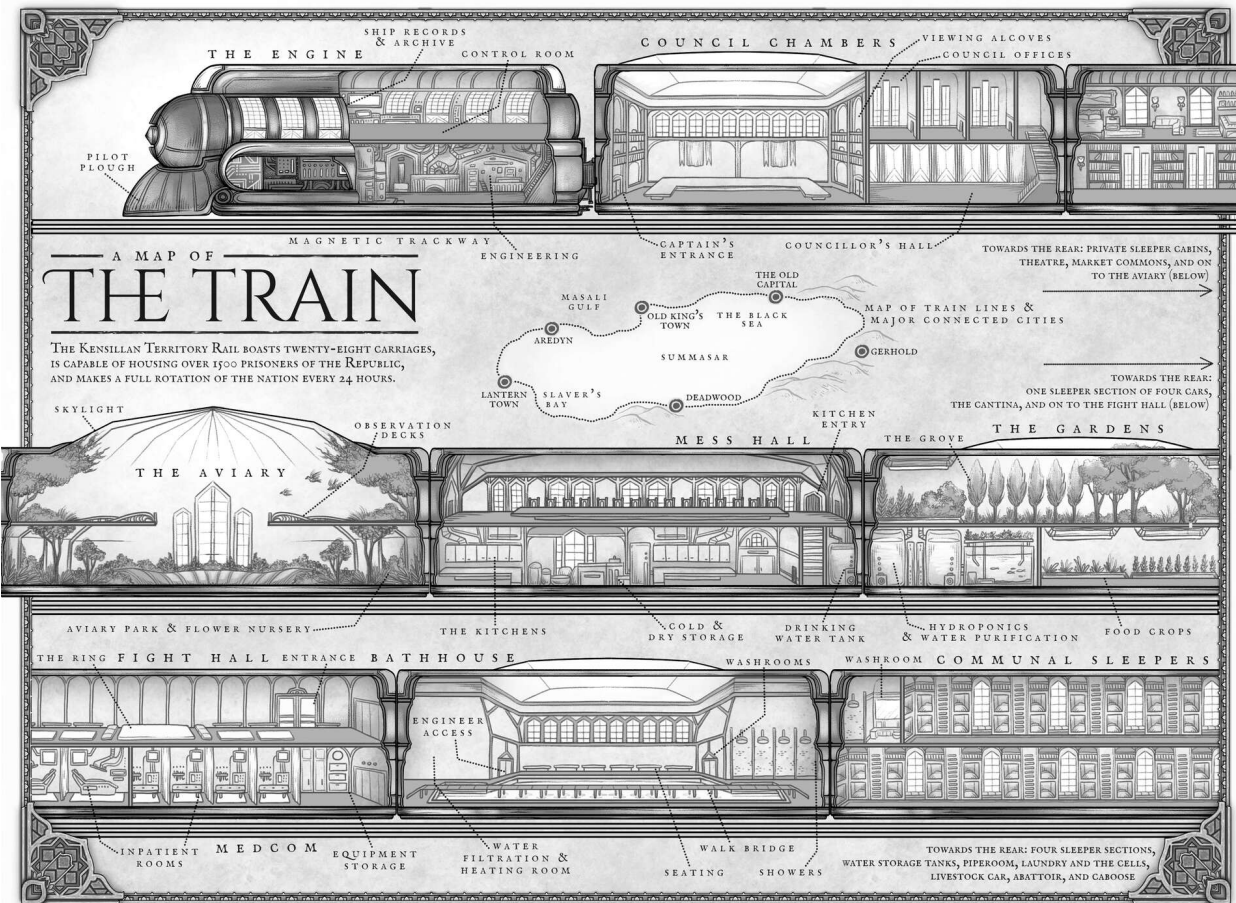


*[Please check my website for a full list](#)*

**Glossaries and a character guide can also be found at the end of the book.**







"Grandmother, what big teeth you have got!"

"All the better to eat you up with."

And, saying these words, this wicked wolf fell upon Little Red Riding Hood and ate her all up.

— *Charles Perrault*



## THE GOD FALL

*The Prean Kingdom of Athus believed themselves to be intentionally hindered in their societal progress and sought a solution to diminish the Nine's influence over their lives. Their Engineers believed their gods power was situated on Rinnisar, the God Isle which had resided over the kingdoms of Prea since the dawn. So they created a device which would cut the isle off from it's power source, The Gods Sphere. But they never anticipated that it would effect all the God Isles. Across the continent of Idica, every God Isle fell from the sky, devastating the landscape and displacing the pantheons on earth. How each nation reacted to their gods now walking beside humanity was varied, but one fact remains constant amongst scholars. The gods' own chosen warriors, possessors of godly gifts, had a hand in The God Fall.*

A Completed History Of Idica - Circa 456AF

*Blessed are those who were gifted by the gods, for they caused the fall and the divine were made to walk the earth, spreading their righteousness so that we might be worthy of Ascension.*

THE TENTH TENET OF CELESTISUM

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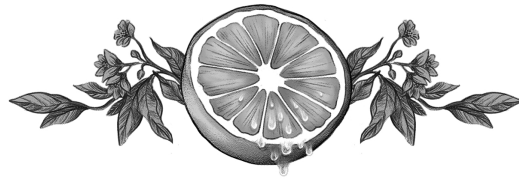
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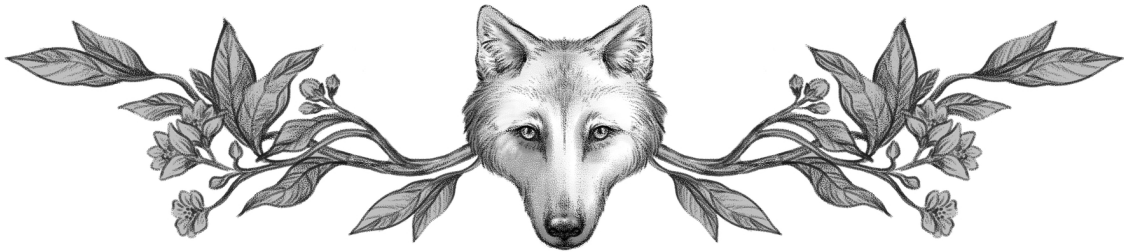


## DEDICATION

For the constant procrastinators.  
Don't wait to chase that dream.  
Start now.



And to Mum.  
Without your support, your chatterbox of a daughter would never  
have been able to call herself an author. Thanks for being my  
sounding board.



## RIEKA

I hungered for the kill. Every part of me that was predator crooned with the knowledge that my prey was running from me.

Adrenaline pumped in my veins, urging me further as the stag perfumed the forest air with the honeyed scent of fear. My heartbeat pulsed in my ears steadily, a reminder that if I were human the speed at which I ran would have stopped my heart by now.

The stag made a drastic turn up ahead.

Feet pounding hard against the forest floor, I veered in the same direction, the stag's heartbeat drumming erratically as it desperately tried to outrun me.

It would fail as they all did.

My boots beat down into the landscape as the stag veered again, choosing the thickest part of the forest to escape capture.

I made the hasty decision to cut him off up ahead. The brush snapped underfoot when I slid down an embankment into a clearing.

Instinct made me freeze.

Yellow eyes greeted me over the carcass of a snow hare.

Ears jutting out, his stare fixed on me, the white wolf's lips curled back, his teeth bared in warning.

I was trespassing.

Tail erected in a display of dominance; he growled at me when it was clear I would not heed his warning.

He moved to attack, his scent indicating his interest in human prey.

A growl ripped up my throat and the white wolf skittered to a halt, his tail tucking between his legs. His entire body cowered under my gaze. The spectral I called forth, the six-foot black wolf strode towards him as he crouched low, ears straight back. It hovered over the submitting wolf as he rolled over in the blanket of snow presenting me with his most vulnerable part. His belly.

Keeping my wolf in a dominant position, I offered the real wolf a choice. I brought forth another spectral, of the white wolf himself and made it run from the clearing with his kill in his mouth. The white wolf accepted my offer. Retrieving the snow hare, ears still back and eyes downcast but fixed on me, he fled the clearing with his life.

I released a quivering breath as I tried to stop my hands shaking.

It was a rare thing for me to show my dominance. Rarer still for me to encounter a wolf who was unfamiliar with my kind. Wolf-Blessed Brutes were not as common in this part of the world as one would think. We were still bound by our humanity and preferred the comfort of a fire over the darkness of a wolf den.

The monolithic ancient trees that encompassed The Hetra were too accustomed to creating the illusion of solitude. It was easy to forget one was not alone in the vast white wasteland, cocooned in the silence that befell the icy landscape during its perpetual winter.

Perhaps that was why I had fled so far from Deos.

The Hetra was the last place the Ecclesiarchy would expect to find a member of their Devout caste. Hiding in the white instead of dressed in it. Surrounded by what the priesthood called delusions of the unenlightened mind.

One such delusion whispered to me on a breeze that had not existed a moment ago. The spirit brushed at a white strand of hair that had escaped my braid as I had run, gently pulling at it like a child did their mother's skirts.



I swatted at it, urging it away. Twenty-two years alongside visible gods were long enough to forfeit control of my life, I wasn't looking to hand it over to invisible ones.

A message from my wolf brother Tiny crossed the clearing. A spectral of the stag. He had closed in on the animal's location and he was steering it towards Taren.

With the trail of its scent still lingering in the air, I followed it, trudging from the clearing. When the ground below my feet thinned, the white disappearing to reveal damp soil, I ran, the icy air burning as it passed through my lungs.

The scent thickened to my right, and I jumped a downed log to pursue the beast. Soft were my footfalls, the silent skill a trait of my breed of Apex Brute. Born with the predatory instinct of a wolf, hunting came as naturally to me as breathing. An instinct gifted to me through my blessing by a god who shall remain nameless. I'd often found it more a curse than a blessing.

My prey emerged from the trees parallel to me and I signalled to Tiny to intercede. The stag suddenly veered off its chosen course, running straight across my path.

I ran faster, my pulse a thundering drumming in my ears. Our paths started to converge; the beast unable to change course on account of the grey wolf pursuing it from the right. Tiny chased after the stag in ravenous delight.

Ten seconds and the stag and I would meet.

Five seconds and I willed my blessing to obey me.

Two seconds and I leapt for it, my arms outstretched in anticipation of the kill.

Bare fingers passed over fur where claws should have met flesh, tearing into it.

The stag passed me, and I rolled into a crouch. An angry rumble escaped my throat at the realisation that my blessing had once again failed me. That I was indeed as defective as I had always been.

An Apex incapable of manifesting her blessing at will.

I bolted after my prey, my muscles wailing at the sheer force of use, the distance between us decreasing by the second.

The air whistled softly to my left. The sound of an arrow striking flesh rung like a wet drum in the silence of the forest.

The stag fell.

I came to an abrupt stop where the stag lay as Tiny emerged from the trees to my right. The grey wolf approached the downed beast with his nose low to the ground, his hunger palpable through our connection. He looked up at me, eyes focused as he spoke. A spectral of himself appeared between us, eating the animal as another one of myself crouched beside him, my teeth ripping at a raw piece of flesh in my hands, gorging ourselves on the kill. Tiny knew I didn't enjoy food in the same manner he did, but he always offered.

I shared with him the memory of our companion butchering another deer and throwing him chunks of meat. As always Tiny understood my meaning and proceeded to back away from the carcass, to await his reward.

The trees rustled overhead, and Taren emerged from the canopy, his large, feathered wings, brown and regal spread wide to allow for his flighted descent.

As Kanahari, a native of The Hetra, he knew these lands better than anyone. How The White could threaten to swallow you whole if you didn't respect her. How it was suicide to travel across her without a Kanahari guide. And how if you took one of the lives that resided within her, respect must be shown if one did not wish to incur the wrath of the Eldertides, the invisible spirits the Kanahari tribesman claimed resided in The Hetra. Beings they believed were older than even the Gods of Idica.

The delusions of an unenlightened mind.

My bitterness at my failure to control my blessing must have been particularly pungent because Taren thought it prudent to commend my efforts. A gesture unlike him.

**"Your speed has improved. I was barely keeping pace above,"** the voice in his head said, addressing me in that dulcet gravelly tone of his.

*"Did Taren Tenamai just compliment me?"* my inner voice replied as the winged Brute side-eyed me and responded. **"I said barely."**

The first and last time I received a compliment from the stoic Kanahari was when he revealed he knew of my ability to hear people's thoughts and noted how much more useful it would be in my endeavour to leave The Hetra than my consistently failing attempts to use my Blessing while hunting. If I offered my services to the seasons' hunting parties, I would make enough coin for my passage to Prea within two months. But as I preferred to keep my species status private, and my tongue attached to my body—Kanahari were much more accustomed and accommodating to my kind than the rest of the continent—I insisted on keeping it between us. Hence why our current conversation was silent to the world.

The moment his boots touched down on the white forest floor, his demeanour shifted. The sharpness of his expression softened, his gaze and scent turned to melancholy as he looked upon the dying stag and knelt before it. Speaking in his native tongue, words it had taken me three months to learn, Taren gave thanks to the animal for its sacrifice.

"For joining the Eldertides so I may live another day in your stead."

When the final word had left his lips, Taren swiftly sliced his blade across the creature's jugular, the hot liquid spilling onto the white snow, the air above filling with steam.

I rushed to place the canister used to collect the animal's blood beneath the clean cut and instinctively breathed in the scent.

The part of me that was like Tiny, predatory, instinctual, Wolf-Blessed craved it. I longed to have the animal's blood running down my throat, desperate to satiate an unnameable need inside of me. The other side of me, the girl who grew up blinded by her love for her Celestial Gods, desired nothing more than to crawl into the deepest darkest hole in the earth and never come out. That need had sent me running to the farthest north, as far from my god's eyes as possible.

I inhaled again and let the memories surface.

Glistening crimson pooled around my bare feet. Warmth caressed the length of my fingers like silk ribbons. The taste of melted butter on my tongue.

*"Exposure to the thing that frightens you will help you overcome it,"* my father's voice echoed in my mind.

I opened my eyes, and Taren handed me the blade, and just as I'd seen him do a hundred times before, just as he had taught me, I began to dress the animal. Cold and precisely, I cut through the flesh, the knife doing what my own claws had failed to do. And I rid the creature of the very thing I believed had stayed behind in Deos when I had fled the Ecclesiarchy.

The deer's heart sunk deep into the snow, vanishing from the world. Until Tiny retrieved the organ, leaving a scarlet trail across the white as he partook in his reward.

After letting the carcass drain from a nearby tree, Taren and I dragged it over to the sled at the bottom of the snow drift where he watched me intensely tie it, securing it to the timber frame. Teaching me how to not be a burden to his sister had been his mission these last four months. He'd blamed my coming from a big city in Deos, the westernmost nation in Idica for my inability to build a snare. My innate tracking skills, my perfect sense of direction, and the fact my senses were on par with his own, if not better, were the only reason he hadn't given up on teaching me to hunt like a human. Ensuring that his sister Krisenya was not left to do all the heavy lifting when she and I left tomorrow was all he could do to help me compensate for an inability to control my blessing. His words.

We dragged the sled to the snowmobile and reached the edge of town just as the sun crested the mountain behind Keltjar. The vehicle's motor grunted to a sputtering stop when we pulled up. Taren had purchased it from a pair of hunters from the Prean Union five seasons ago and even then, it had been an antique.

"You did well today, arashon," Taren spoke in that quiet tone of his, all calm and centred as he untied the rope fastening the deer to the sled. I'd known him five months and he still called me an arashon, a southerner.

"Good enough to not be left behind by your sister?"

"It is good you are paying her in advance." There was no use in finding offence in his words. Honest sincerity was a trait I had quickly learned was common amongst the Kanahari. His sister when

we had first met six months ago had insulted and complimented me all in the same breath.

"I've never seen an arashon with white hair before." Having just spent a month escorting ill-equipped hunters on a guided hunt through the White, Kris had entered the inn in all manner of discomfort, mumbling what I now knew to be Kanahari profanities, throwing off layer after layer of clothing, dispersing them to the floor on her path for a prime position by the fire, where she paused upon seeing me in the opposite armchair. It would be less than a week before I realised bluntness was a Kanahari quirk. The same amount of time it had taken my roots to change from black to white against my will.

"A darker shade would blanch your face. Grey eyes with black hair. Don't ever dye it," she had added, leaning back into the armchair and pulling out a smoking pipe from her vest pocket. A stark contrast to the fuzzy white curls that framed her doll-like features.

A Terrestrial Brute, Fox-Blessed at that, casually sitting opposite a Wolf-Blessed Apex, and without any hint of aggression or fear. I knew right then that she was the woman who I wanted to guide my passage across The Hetra to Prea where I would be free of all gods.

"Admit it, Taren, you will miss my company," I teased lightly. Taren unlike his sister had the patience to teach someone defective like myself to hunt as humans did. A task for which I could never truly repay him. The smallest rise of the corner of his mouth was the only indication of his amusement.

I attempted to lift the duffle from the sled only for it to refuse to budge. Shame once again fell over me. An Apex who could not control her strength at will was not much of an Apex. Taren had no such issues. His blessing allowed him to easily lift our prize from the sled, weightlessly throwing it over his shoulder.

A thick fog lay heavy on the town this side of the dawn. An eerie silence fit for haunted tales of headless knights and ghostly apparitions often dissuaded visitors from venturing the road in the morning. Lest they walk into a stone wall or another hunter's sword. Not that swords were required in this part of the world, but it did happen on occasion. Bright-lights were always recommended, the

luminos contained within the small canisters burned brighter than any fire. My own—the size of a child’s fist— hung around my neck illuminating our path through the fog to the inn.

Engar’s burly frame passed by the window as we arrived at the back door, his melodious hums a sign of his preoccupation. When he took me on as his kitchen assistant, claiming the job meant living in the isolated mountain town of Keltjar for months at a time, I had assumed he’d done so because he needed the extra help during hunting season, but I soon learned that wasn’t the case. As both owner and cook of The Old Man’s Hearth, Engar could calculate the number of ingredients he required for a single meal off the top of his head without any formal education. He could cook a dinner for forty single-handedly. I’d even seen him throw a six-foot-tall Imperial drunkard across the courtyard without breaking a sweat. Engar didn’t need the help. It was the company he desired. He offered me twice that of other town cooks, and when he discovered I could bake, he offered me a Hunting Season bonus. Five per cent from any order of my baked goods bought during the season. I took the job much to my then companions’ disappointment.

Pausing outside the door as Engar turned his back to it, I immediately removed my snow boots, careful not to let them make a sound as they touched down on the cold stone.

We had this ritual, he and I. A bet really. We’d been having a debate over the advantage Terrestrial blessings had over Apexes. Even with my defective blessing, my instincts seemed to be the only traits that never failed me—Wolf-Blessed like myself had the innate ability to stealthily walk on our toes without making a sound and so I bet him that I could sneak up on every resident Terrestrial in Keltjar. His response was to promise that if I managed that, he would tell me the true story of how he ended up so far from the Imperial City, and not the tale he told everyone else. That he punched a guy for being an asshole.

“You’re always insisting I’m lying. You manage to sneak up on me last, and I’ll tell you the truth.”

At first, I’d been hesitant. Engar was hard of hearing. His right ear had been ripped off by a Brute during a fight at the border, and his

left ear drum was destroyed due to a slap sustained in a bar fight five years ago. Someone had suggested that a trip to one of those black markets down south might obtain him the services of an Organic skilled in cellshaping who might repair and regrow what he'd lost, but Engar had rebuffed the idea. He liked the selectiveness his hearing aid provided in his retirement.

I believed I had an unfair advantage over him because of this. But Engar had assured me, *I* was the one at the disadvantage. He even agreed to have his hearing aids turned off when the time came for me to target him.

Taren, having witnessed our antics before, simply rolled his big brown eyes and waited, the carcass just hanging over his shoulder.

My soft-soled shoes made no sound as I entered through the open kitchen door.

Four steps between us. Three steps.

"Morning Rieka."

The thrill of the hunt vanished in an instant, the wolf in me utterly deflated.

*That's the fifth time he's known it was me.*

Engar turned around to greet me, only for a shrill squeal to escape him, startling him enough that his blessing emerged. His one ear dropped and elongated, tusks grew out from his bottom jaw and his normally large nose squashed into a snout.

"By the God's Sphere Taren!"

I spun around and found the Kanahari just standing in the doorway, his wings tightly pressed against his back, staring at the startled cook. Taren moved past me to deposit the deer carcass on the benchtop, greeting Engar with a stoic nod of the head as the Swine-Blessed cook switched on his hearing aid.

"How do you always manage to hear me," I sighed amused, closing the distance and stretching up on my tiptoes to peck him on the cheek. "But Taren scares you without even trying."

Engar shook off his blessing, returning his appearance to that of the burly and balding retired imperial guard I knew. "I told you, Terrestrial senses trump Apexes."

*Vibrations, he's going to say.*



"Vibrations," he said, handing me my apron with a smile.

A light dusting of snow drifted to the floor as I untucked my braid from my shawl. "I believe my last day of employment was yesterday."

"Consider it punishment for losing the bet," he added when I hung up my coat.

I took the apron from him with a smile and a "Yes Boss," and proceeded to tie it as I approached the common room doors. My ears caught the raucous morning chorus before I'd even pushed them open.

Usually, this time of morning was quiet, but with hunting season starting tomorrow, and the workers from Farbor Ice Mines returning due to the annual temperature drop further north, Old Man's was full. A pity really, the coin today would make the little gold gremlin in me salivate. Thirty hunters had registered with just our inn this season, and at least ten of them had sought the employment of a Kanahari guide, like Taren. The rest of the inn's guests encompassed tired, red-faced, snow-burned miners who were thoroughly enjoying Engar's full breakfast over the compact freeze-dried meal packs the mining companies provided them.

Two families had arrived from the Preat Union. One was from one of the hydrotech kingdoms of Torvar. They thought it amazing that the entire northern section of our great continent of Idica was made up entirely of ice and snow and they just needed to tick it off some destination checklist. The other was Setrali, their wide-brimmed hats, and finely embroidered silks made it keenly obvious they were from the southernmost island of the continent. Their attire was entirely unsuitable for the northern climate, and they photographed everything, including their meals. The last of our rooms filled only yesterday. Three guests had to share a room. One was a botanist from the School of Geomechanics in Athus, the other a Kanahari making their annual pilgrimage through the White, and a man who in the three days since his arrival had sat reading a different book each morning with his breakfast. Today's book, the title written in Old Preat read "Tales of The Nine." The first time he said a word to me was when I served him his breakfast.

"You don't happen to serve kharee here?"

The bitter bean beverage was difficult to import this far north of Pazgar, a fact I have had to live with for a year. Three-hundred and sixty days since my lips had touched its delectable goodness. I informed him of the travesty.

"Pity," he said, his voice heavily accented. Lycoan perhaps. "Someone could really make some coin if they could manage it." He leaned forward, taking in the smell of the savoury good, his scent a clear indication of his pleasure.

He didn't look like a typical Lycoan. He was at least three inches too short, and whilst his hair was the right colour, he had all of it. Lycoans regularly shaved the sides of their heads. Both sexes. The only thing he did possess which was indicative of the people of that kingdom was the runic tattoo on his chest.

The blue whorls and lines seemed to dance under the Bright-lights of the dining room.

I'd only ever read about the tattoos. A Lycoan began receiving the runes when they came of age, and their number would only increase throughout their lives, expanding the breadth of the tattoo across their chest. It represented their heritage, their position in society and the expected nature of their life. As foreign as his home was, I could only recall one of the runes from my studies with certainty. *Me'lai.*

*He is unmarried.*

"Something else?"

My cheeks flushed. He'd caught me staring.

"Is it any good?" I asked, hoping the change in subject had deterred any suggestion it was his body I was admiring and not the book in his hands.

"It's interesting. A lot of mighty feats and impossible odds if you like that kind of thing." He flipped it closed and offered it to me. "I'm done with it if you'd like to read it?"

Flattered but knowing myself, I declined. "I prefer real history."

A single pale blond eyebrow rose as if he were curious. "You think these tales are false?"

"The word tale implies a narrative that is imaginatively recounted. I'd rather immerse myself in the words of those who have taken the time to record the world's truths than waste my time on an account of real people that stretch the truth for propaganda's sake."

"So that was just a phase?" He indicated to the tattoo of seven black spots on my left wrist, the ones I usually had covered by my gloves but were at that moment packed in my coat hanging back in the kitchen.

"I outgrew them."

"Careful," he chuckled, the sound causing a fluttering in my chest. "They might hear you."

Engar's baritone voice called my name through the kitchen doors. "RIEKA!"

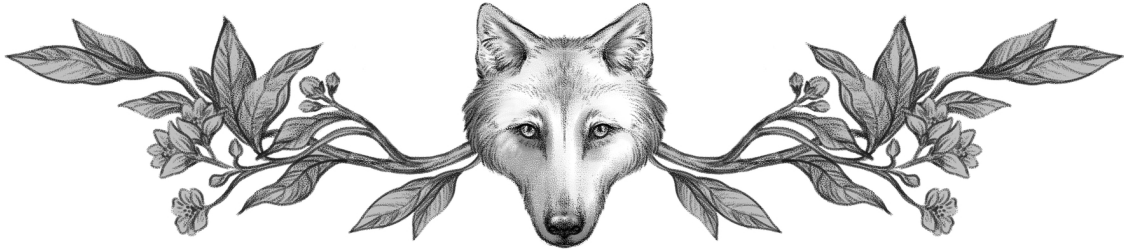
"Coming!" I returned my attention to the Lycoan to excuse myself from the conversation but found him cutting into his pie greedily.

A few paces from the kitchen, a familiar gait passed through the inn's entrance. Kris had finally returned. Her family's Imta, the blessing-crafted home, was built in the Kanahari village just outside of town and since our trip to Prea would mean she'd be gone for months, she'd travelled there today to bid them farewell. The hair on my arms stood on end as the door swung shut behind her. Irritation was not the scent I expected upon her return.

Kris marched towards me, nostrils flared, eyes narrowed as the crowd of miners that we had been expecting to arrive that morning passed through the doors behind her, and with them, a surprising spectral from Tiny.

No sooner had I seen the image of my former lover standing before me, did the actual man pass through it, dispersing the image like smoke.

Standing no taller than five feet and with a scowl that would make a baby cry, Kris came to a stop in front of me. "Tell me again why you slept with that horse penis?"



## RIEKA

Everything about Leon Arnow was in one word—desirable.

If the gods still took human lovers, there would have been wars fought over him. He was charming, affectionate, had a voice like malt whiskey and if he smiled, a woman was likely to come right there in her undergarments.

Of all the men who I'd *convinced* to let me tag along on their travels, Leon had been my favourite. He had just one flaw.

Pride. Which is what I gathered Kris had stepped on escorting him from the ice mines to Keltjar.

"You think he still holds a grudge against you?" As though he had heard Kris's words, Leon looked at me from across the room and the acrid scent of negativity struck me at the same time his inner voice did.

***"You should have left!"***

Kris' nose twitched. She'd caught the scent as well. I tried to keep the disdain from my voice. "You were saying?"

My efforts to avoid his table during service were the equivalent of forgetting to heat the oven before baking a cake. Impossible.

The miners were quite eager to stuff themselves, a lack of quality food a likely reason for their overindulgence in fats and ales. The

several times I had served their table today, Leon's commentary had been exactly as I'd expected.

***"I can't believe you're still fucking here!"***

***"Gods I miss those legs."***

***"Your ass looks great in those pants. Mountain life suits you."***

Sena, the local girl Engar had hired to replace me arrived on the tenth hour, and with the dining room having dwindled down to Leon's table and the three latecomers, I was keen to head back to my room. I just had to deliver the last order to his table and then I could go.

*Easy.*

Except, Leon's table was rowdy.

"No. My ma always said it was a war between the Isles. Turned the God Sphere dark when they fell," insisted one miner.

"You're wrong," the second one said with a hiccup. "It was those Preans. They stopped worshipping The Nine and the whole damn isle fell out of the sky and took all the others with it."

The first slammed down his mug of ale. "No. It was a war. Why do you think the five pantheons don't talk no more?"

"And how do you know they don't talk no more, you met any gods lately?" the first jeered as I stopped at the table, the heat of Leon's stare reminding me just how long it had been since a man looked at me that way.

"You don't know. I could have." The second hiccupped again.

I'd been surprised when travelling through this part of the continent that such worldly topics were being discussed. I'd known Kanahari villages were not the only ones in The Hetra. Thousands of humans had settled in these parts after the Fall, generations isolated in the cold, cut off from the world down south, where the Gods used The Fall to implement their rule in person.

I had expected the conversations to come from travelling scholars from the Prean Schools of Engineering. Not locals and definitely not from overworked labourers mining for ice.

Leon's hand moved closer to the edge of the table, inches from where mine hung at my thigh. I withdrew it and placed the tray of

crispy fried chicken on the table.

He cleared his throat beside me. "Why don't you ask Rieka here? She knows more about Idica than anyone I've ever met."

The two miners looked up at me like they hadn't even noticed I'd placed the food on the table, despite the fact one of them already had a piece of chicken halfway to their mouth.

I refused to look at Leon. He'd done this intentionally, an excuse to talk to me. I opened my mouth to object, but he cut me off. "They're arguing over The God Fall. What started it, war or the Preans?"

The two men continued to stare; Leon continued to burn a hole into the side of my face. I wasn't going anywhere unless I answered this question it seemed.

"Neither," I said casually. "It was the Athusians."

Confusion lined the second miner's features. "Aren't they the same as Preans?"

Number one elbowed him with a hiss. "Leon's Athusian."

"Prea is the region, Harol. Athus is a kingdom within the Prean Union," Leon said, addressing the second man without removing his gaze from me.

Harol grumbled. "So why aren't you telling us how it happened?"

Finally, Leon looked away, the smallest of smiles on his face as if amused by his fellow miner's comment. "Do you know what happened in your village five centuries ago?" The miner closed his mouth slowly and returned his gaze to me.

I took a half-step away from Leon before I spoke. "The accounts are all slightly different but, they all agree the science and technology that now rules the Prean Union was used to attack the Prean God Isle. The device they used to target The Nine not only brought down their Isle but it made the other Isles fall from the God Sphere."

Thousands of artistic depictions of the event were spread all over Idica, in tapestries and sculptures, media reels and paintings. It was what was depicted after that wasn't widespread. How the different pantheons chose vastly different methods for dealing with those that caused The Fall. Genocide, empowerment, forgiveness, submission and one disappearing altogether.

"And now they walk among us," miner number one mumbled, his words indicating he was a believer in the Preat tale that The Nine after The Fall chose to hide amongst humanity, disguised as humans.

Harol just looked more confused. "But they're the gods. Doesn't our being able to do something like that to them mean they aren't that powerful?"

I picked up their two empty ale mugs and stood back. "Who says the gods didn't let it happen? Athus and Lycoa had stopped worshipping The Nine long before the Fall. Halinon had been at war with The Gods Hold over opinions of heresy for almost half a century. The first School of Geomechanics had just been built in Torvar and Setria had just named Ormus Steamwell the Dean of the School of Hydromechanics. I'd say the gods abandoned them. But that's just one woman's opinion."

I turned from their table.

Glass shattered as the empty ale mugs I'd been holding fell from my grip. The sudden contact of Leon's hand as he touched my wrist sent my body into a sudden panic.

A glance over to Kris told me she still sat in her chair by the hearth, her pipe still smoking, wedged between her teeth. But she stared at Leon with a cutting glare. Tiny, who'd scented my shock sent a spectral of himself, offering to tear apart whatever had frightened me.

I reassured him I was fine.

Because I was.

Leon had already rushed to the floor to pick up the pieces, an apology falling from his lips. I signalled for Sena to bring me over a dust bucket and broom and began sweeping it up.

When he realised he was being of no help he ran his hands through his hair, the whiff of almonds a reminder I used to enjoy doing the same thing. That I had once made myself care about this man because it was the only way to survive. Leon apologised again and I assured him it was fine.

I stood, the shattered glass screeching loudly in the pewter bucket and walked over to the bar. I'd only just handed the bucket over to

Sena when Leon sidled up beside me.

**"Your hair changed,"** his inner voice said softly as he leaned on the bar. I could feel his eyes, their gaze heavy as they trailed the braid down my back. The drastic change from black to white occurred very soon after we parted. It was a new facet of my blessing, and one I suspected was due to my new environment. Brutes this far north tended to have white fur. And it was just another part of my blessing I couldn't control even if I wanted to.

**"I didn't know your taint could do that."**

Sometimes, living this far north where the Kanahari treat our Blessings like gifts, it was easy to forget half the continent didn't see them the same way. Taint was the term decreed by the first Emperor of the Prean Union, and until I crossed the border from Deos, I'd never heard a single soul speak it aloud.

I took a deep breath before turning to face Leon.

He was still so damn handsome. Coarse black curls, square chiselled jaw and those pale green eyes.

And a beard! He'd always seen them as a sign of laziness, and now he sported a thick black one that made his lips look all the more desirable.

*Of course he looks more handsome with a beard!*

"Good Harvest, Leon. I hope the season has been kind to you," I said, greeting him as pleasantly as I could. His anger, confusion and desire swirled around in the space between us like a snowstorm.

"It has, thank you, Rieka."

One of the miners mumbled under his breath, "Ain't Rieka the one that taught him how to make them sweet cakes?"

Leon scratched at his beard. "I didn't expect to find you still here, not after—"

After I'd left him unceremoniously standing outside in the snow after having accepted Engar's offer of employment? Me neither.

"It's been six months," he continued. "I thought you'd have made it to Prea by now."

I stared at my ex-lover nonchalantly. "It took me six months to save enough coin for the passage to Prea."



His calm exterior faltered. "So you'll take everyone else's coin except mine?" There it was. That pride he'd held so dear. It carved away at the smile lines of his face, by his eyes, turning that boyish charm I'd so admired into harsh steel.

My silence made him shift again, straightening himself off the bar top. "Sorry. I just don't understand why you didn't just let me take you?"

Half a dozen pairs of eyes remained fixed on us, his table companions drunkenly snickering to themselves about Leon being a lovestruck fool. Lovestruck was an understatement. My mistake in choosing Leon as a travel companion was underestimating his capacity to love. The last I'd heard of him before today was that he'd managed to find employment in the Farbor Ice Mines wallowing over the woman who'd left him for an apple pie.

"Like I told you when we first met Leon, I only needed your help getting to Keltjar. We parted ways per our agreement. I thought you understood that?" My voice was as genuine as I could make it. And the fact I wasn't lying should have helped the matter, but Leon had a stubborn streak.

He scoffed, his mouth twisting into a smirk. "And I thought you weren't this callous."

"I call it being practical. We kept each other company during the day and warmed one another's bed at night. If you felt anything more, it was unintentional. Good day, Leon."

And therein lay my biggest issue. It wasn't unintentional. Life had taught me that there were two ways to get someone to do what you wanted. The first was by force. But since I wasn't a god who could enforce their will upon anyone, I was left with option number two.

Seduction.

The problem with intentionally making a man fall in love with you so that you can travel across the continent, fleeing for a crime you can't remember committing, in the hopes of ending up in a place where the crime isn't recognised, was making them fall out of love with you.

And since I'd never fallen for any of them, my behaviour after the relationship ended, if I'd ever been so lucky to run into them again,

made me look like a cold-hearted bitch.

So I should have expected his behaviour. But the moment I turned to walk away from the bar, he grabbed my wrist, his fingers digging into the flesh beneath my sleeve. My body froze.

Tiny bombarded my vision with images. Visceral, angry spectrals. Begging me to let him come so he could rip apart to pieces whatever had frightened me.

Kris had risen from her chair, her presence however small, was threatening enough to send one of the guests scurrying up the stairway.

"I thought you loved me Rieka!" The stench of ale invaded the space between us, tainting his every word. It explained his reaction. Leon had always avoided alcohol, he didn't like who he was when he drank. Now I knew why.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears, threatening to beat out of my chest.

Damp soil after a rain—the kind that gets stuck to the bottom of a boot—pine needles clinging to the mud, perfumed the air. I focused on that and inhaled until my knuckles were no longer white from holding the broom handle as if it were the edge of a cliff. I had to force Tiny's spectrals to the edge of my vision as the knot in my stomach tightened.

"Leon you're hurting me," I finally managed to say as I glanced down at his hand on my wrist.

The alcohol-infused stupor that had overtaken him was broken through by my words and he suddenly realised what he was doing and released my wrist. But Leon refused to move, blocking my path.

My blessing was uncooperative most of the time. If I tried to move him by force, I'd likely break a hand. Even though he was human, Leon was still built like a bear.

His eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you Rieka."

"Believe what you want Leon, there is nothing between us any longer."

With his voice low, and the alcohol aiding in his discontent, Leon closed the space between us. "All those nights together in the Pass, and you still felt nothing?" His eyes fell to my chest.

**"Oh how I've missed your body,"** his inner voice crooned as his eyes trailed down my figure.

I attempted to move around him, but it only urged Leon to close the distance. I walked right into his chest.

Trying to ignore the way the alcohol-induced smirk on his face twisted his lovely features, I took a deep breath. "This is beneath you, Leon." His expression hardened, his eyes darkening.

This was not the man who'd carried me on his back for two days when he thought I'd sprained my ankle. This man was the perfect example of what happened when selfishness met kindness. And broke it.

He opened his mouth as if to say something else.

"Is everything alright, darlin'?" came a smooth mellifluous voice.

The Lycoan, at least three inches shorter than Leon had silently wandered over to us moving his body to within a foot from mine, his gaze directed on the broader, much larger man before him. Much to my surprise he'd addressed me in Deogn when earlier we'd spoken in Preat.

Flattered that the man thought I needed saving, I opened my mouth to inform him I had everything under control when at that exact moment the Lycoan's inner voice spoke up.

**"I wonder if you'll think this chivalrous, sweeping in to pretend to be your lover to get this guy to piss off,"** he said as he looked down at me from the deepest of blue eyes. **"I should have called you wife instead, right?"**

"Fuck off pretty boy," Leon growled at the Lycoan. "This is none of your concern."

Completely unaffected by Leon and his threatening scent, an indication of the Lycoan not possessing a Brute blessing, he quite casually responded.

"I'm flattered you think I'm pretty. My mother would thank you for the compliment. I have her cheekbones," he said breezily before his tone starkly shifted. A warning, in tone and scent. He took a step towards Leon. "And you are incorrect. It is my concern when you make threatening advances on my wife."

Leon's mouth formed a hard line as his attention was ripped from the Lycoan to me, the woman who had betrayed him in more ways than one.

His inner voice shook. ***"You married this asshole?"***

Whilst no Brute was capable of entirely shapeshifting into the creature of their blessing, as an Apex Brute I should have been able to call on any aspect of that metamorphic state. However, I had been defective since birth and could only hope my wolf side didn't show up in high anxiety moments, let alone the traumatic ones sending me into a blackout with no recollection of what had occurred during the interim. So the only parts I could always rely on was my instincts and my senses. And right now, without looking at him, I could tell the Lycoan's body was mere inches away, his hand hovering by my hip and not a speck of ill intention in the air between us.

I took his hand. His body was utterly at ease with the sudden contact from me, and so I entwined our fingers together.

Leon saw this and his entire presence seemed to deflate, like a puppet whose strings had been cut and he was seconds away from collapsing onto the ground.

One of the miners quickly approached and wrapped a wind-dried hand around Leon's shoulder. "And he's very happy for you, aren't you mate?" He tried moving Leon, but the Athusian was fused to the spot, my previous rejection of his affections made all the more painful by this sudden announcement.

Leon chose to remain silent, so I chose to end the conversation. "I wish you nothing but happiness Leon, and I truly hope you find it one day."

He did as I'd hoped. Leon glowered one last time at the Lycoan and then let his colleague lead him back over to their table where he proceeded to take one of the mugs of ale and swing it for several seconds.

After a minute, the consecutive string of spectrals Tiny had sent since my confrontation with Leon finally faded, the last one being the image of himself dining on a snow hare. He informed me that

since I did not need his assistance, he would be unavailable for the next hour. The near-altercation had ignited his hunger.

The Lycoan whose hand I realised I was still holding chose that moment to whisper in my ear. "Not that I'd ever object to holding a beautiful woman's hand, but perhaps now would be the right time to move this ruse away from the jaded ex-lover."

I turned and found myself facing the very source of the earth and pine scent. It took me a moment to curb my wolf instinct and not rub my face against his, letting my skin soak up his scent. Longer than a moment if I was honest.

*Get it together Rieka!*

I smiled coyly, flirting to distract myself from the consequences of my past actions. "Jealous husband?" The word felt odd on my tongue, a dare that sent shivers down my spine. However, that may have been because the Lycoan was caressing my thumb as we continued to hold hands.

His blond brows knitted. "Certainly not. My mother always said a husband should trust his wife."

"Really? And how would she feel to know you married a woman you just met?" I smiled, unsure why I was continuing this train of conversation. It wasn't at all because of those blue eyes and the way they reminded me of the ocean as the tide came in and the joy I'd felt as the waves threatened to take me under.

The corner of his mouth perked up, the golden bristles of his beard rising with his smile. "I'll have to tell her when I return home."

As his eyes slowly dropped to my lips, I whispered, knowing the sound was beyond Leon's or the miners' human hearing. "And where is home?"

He opened his mouth to respond when another inner voice broke me from my reverie.

**"Married?"** Kris asked, knowing I could hear her since she and her brother alone knew of this facet of my blessing. I looked over the Lycoan's shoulder at her. An amused grin was plastered to her face, her pipe once again perched between her teeth as she stared at me and my "husband." **"Why didn't I get an invitation?"**

The air was cold as it brushed against my hand having quickly withdrawn it from the Lycoan's grasp. I cleared my throat as I stepped away.

"I need to go...bake."



The scent of flour and eggs, of butter and sugar always brought with them memories of my mother in our small bakery in Aronbok, before we were elevated to Devout—the highest caste in Deogn Society. I could recall my brother sneaking in to steal a pastry right off the hot oven tray, my father gently wiping the flour from my mother's cheek, and my mother instructing me on the most precise way to knead the dough. It was a form of expression, of artistry, of devotion.

Now it gave me control. A constructive and healthy outlet for my emotions. I was aware of that fact. I admitted I knew I needed it. Needed the control that baking gave me. There was a structure to the art that when followed correctly provided a result that was satisfactory for both parties involved. Any deviation from those rules and the sense of achievement deflated like an undercooked loaf of bread.

The strawberry pie I had decided to bake for instance; the filling needed exactly two tablespoons of lemon. Any more, and the taste was unbalanced. The crust required cold butter to be worked quickly into the flour mixture or else the texture was wrong, and the moisture should be evenly distributed after the dough is formed, so it must be placed in cold storage for one hour. And if it was baked over thirty-two minutes the base would be burnt.

It was particulars like those that kept my thoughts focused, concentrating on the task at hand to ensure that when the occasional stray thought did persist I was quick to refocus. I had to

bake three pies just to ensure I remained in the kitchen for the duration of Leon's wallowing.

I could smell and hear him in the dining room for a few hours after our encounter, chugging down his third mug of ale, his thoughts of rejection intruding on my own. It would do neither of us good to meet again. I needed to think about something else. The scent of the strawberries, the force with which I was kneading the dough.

*Don't overdo it. I don't want it to be rubbery.*

I focused on my arms, on the movement they made when they applied pressure and released it. On the muscles.

The Lycoan was quite muscular. The way the veins popped in his forearms when he held out his book to me. When he had held my hand.

He was still out there. The scent of pine needles and earth snuck their way in amongst the butter and milk. I also detected parchment and ink. And he certainly hadn't been intimidated by Leon's size. Most men would have recoiled. And he spoke both Preat and Deogn, so he was educated. It made me curious. Scholar, wanderer, or something else. He most certainly could have learned the language from a parent, his mother perhaps. Or he could be like myself, self-educated. Though Preat wasn't as difficult as Old Preat and that book was most definitely Old Preat. So many vowels.

He wasn't a Brute. That type of physique came naturally to my kind. A circumstance of our blessings. But he didn't smell like one of the Blessed, so it had to have been worked for. Either pride or necessity led to his appearance.

*His very attractive appearance.*

I decided to bake bread as well.

It was midday when Leon finally ventured up to his room, his almond scent thinning as he rose to the second-floor rooms, and late afternoon when I heard Kris' soft snores coming from her place by the hearth. Engar, who thankfully had no knowledge of what had occurred in the main room left me to my work.

When the dinner service started, with Sena taking over once again, I took out two plates of perfectly cooked, deliciously smelling golden-crust strawberry pie.

I carried them into the dining room, now crowded with a third of the inn's guests. Leon, now having sobered up refused to look me in the eye from the table he occupied in the corner, his shame a harsh cloud hazing the air around him.

When I placed the plate in front of Kris' nose, her eyes shot open and she happily took it from my hands. I then walked over to the far table where the Lycoan was still sitting, the book from earlier keeping his attention, his gold blond hair out in waves just tickling his shoulders. I placed the pie down in front of him.

"It's strawberry pie," I said when he looked up at me curiously, adding that it was on the house.

He instantly brightened at my words, a single eyebrow rising. "Because I'm the in-house baker's husband?" he asked.

"Obviously." The ruse had absolutely not been the reason. But if that was what he thought, I would happily play along. Leon was still in the room after all.

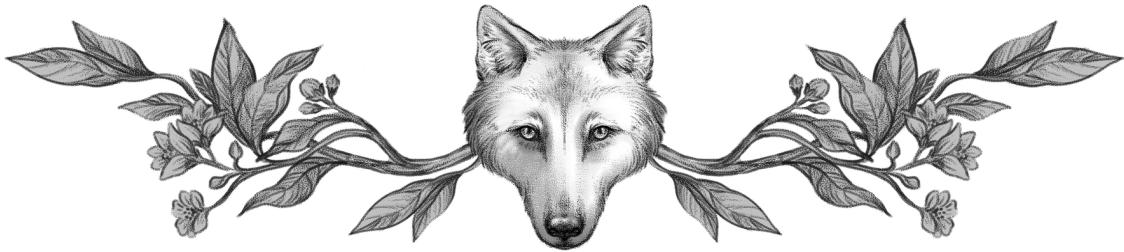
"Who can say no to free pie." He then proceeded to tie back half his hair with a long hairpin from the table.

I watched him intently as he turned the plate to examine the pastry. He took the spoon and almost haphazardly cut through the crust and into the filling.

"It's good," he finally said after the third bite.

I opened my mouth to comment when I heard footsteps approaching from behind. Kris appeared holding a bottle of Torberry Wine in one hand and three glasses in her other. "Who's up for a game of 'Have you ever?'"





## RIEKA

I shouldn't drink.

The remnants of last night circled the waking parts of my mind as I rolled my head further into the pillow. A dart board. Someone shouting "Next round on me," which sounded an *awful* lot like my voice. The taste of mint. Leon's pissed expression. Three glasses.

*Oh, gods! I kissed the Lycoan.*

Alcohol and Brutes were not a good combination. Our metabolisms processed the beverage so unpredictably. It took an exorbitant amount to intoxicate us, but when it did finally hit...Nothing but black. Which I hated.

At least it wasn't Bliss. Gods only know what sight I might have woken up to if I'd ingested that opiate.

Groaning in frustration, I bit into the fabric of the pillow. A small moan sounded, and it wasn't from me. I found a second heartbeat in my room.

Before even looking, I knew what I would see, the owner of the earth and pine needle scent.

Golden waves fell in a mass on the pillow beside me.

*Gods!*

I lifted the furs. I was naked. *He* was naked.

I was right about his body though. His ass was sublime. I dropped the furs and stared at the ceiling.

*I definitely shouldn't drink.*

When I nudged him, he whined rather adorably, shifting to pull the furs over his bare shoulder. I nudged him again, a little more forcefully. "Mr Manners, wake up."

He responded with a mumble, something in a language that I didn't recognise.

*Very well, nothing I haven't dealt with before.*

I extricated myself from the bed and began searching the floor for the remnants of our likely hastily deposited clothes, expecting to find them under the bed. Instead, I found them neatly folded in two piles on the chair in the corner of my room.

*Perhaps my taste in men isn't all that bad.* I tossed the thought aside. I had plans today. Big plans and an attractive naked man in my bed interfered with those plans.

"MORNING!"

My shout startled the man awake. I pulled on my buckskin vest to eliminate the chill and waited for him to sit up.

"Morning to you too, darlin'," he replied huskily, the muscles of his chest rippling as he rolled back his shoulders. He ran his hands through his unbound hair. "Got any water?"

"On the sideboard," I said, picking up his pile of clothes.

He gulped down two glasses before I finally had his attention, his gaze falling on his garments in my hands. "No nonsense. As you wish."

He stood, the furs falling away to reveal his sizeable package. An intentional move on his part, I had no doubt. I sighed and gave his face my attention instead. "Whatever happened last night is in the past. I'm certain I enjoyed our time together. But now I would like you to leave. Please."

"You're certain?"

That same swagger I'd seen from yesterday presented as he approached me, the distance between us decreasing by the second until he was standing no more than three inches from me, and staring down at me through long pale lashes.

At this proximity, his scent was more distinct. Rich soil, damp like the earth after a recent rainfall.

"You don't recall last night?" he asked in a honeyed tone, his breath the warmest thing in the room.

I shoved his clothes into his stomach, a little too forcefully if I were to admit it.

"I remember enough." I moved away from him and stood by the door, my hand on the handle.

"Can I at least put my pants on?"

I indicated for him to proceed. He was painstakingly slow about it. Teasing me to look at his body as he fumbled to pull his trousers up his very toned legs. He smirked just a little when he secured them. He didn't bother belting them, thank the God Sphere, instead fetching his red leather jacket off the back of the chair.

As I opened the door upon his approach, he paused, the expression softening around his eyes. "I'd like to do this again someday." His heartbeat said he wasn't lying.

I pursed my lips. "Unlikely."

"Pity," he said before he walked onto the second-floor landing, headed in the direction of his room. I moved to close my door when he spoke again.

"Do you at least remember my name?"

Another memory floated to the surface through the haze of my hangover; soft lips, dark golden bristles, a bright toothy smile that reached soft ocean-blue eyes, and a name.

*Rhydian*

I lied. "No."

He smiled as though amused. "Thanks for the pie, wife." The door to his room closed a moment later.

After opening my windows to remove his scent from the room, I sat on my bed, head in my hands, contemplating the latest of my already stupid life choices.

I called out to Tiny, asking if he knew where Kris was right now. His reply was a spectral of Kris walking out of the inn's doors into the night air, pulling her hood up over her head and walking through the town square. It then proceeded to display her tripping over her

own feet and falling into a fit of giggles before asking herself if she was okay.

Giggles meant she was drunk. After giggles came the blackout. Kris was definitely sleeping off last night which meant we wouldn't be leaving on schedule today.

Tiny's spectral was replaced with another, of the donkey he once saw drunk on fermented wine. It was accompanied by a distinct feeling of judgment.

My reply was the image of him as he tasted that market stall fruit in Deos that smelled like raw meat but tasted so sour, his face went from salivating wolf to prune real fast.



The water of the hot spring was just enough to wash away the effects of last night from my mind. Taren had introduced them to me a few days after we started hunting, back before my muscles were used to the early morning hikes and hours of lying motionless in the snow. The difference between the springs and the bath at the inn was the air. There was enough heat from the thermal pools that the rock was warm beneath my feet, and I had yet to freeze my ass off when I stepped out.

Tiny could not understand why I liked submerging my *hairless body* underwater. He only ever condoned such behaviour when the necessity to cross a river or lake arose. I'd tried once to explain the satisfaction and enjoyment a human received from bathing in hot water but his reply had been a spectral of a wet, long-haired rat. I did my best now to eradicate that appearance by combing out my hair, the white wet strands taking on a grey tinge.

I braided the top of my hair into a crown and then plaited the lower half down my back, the same way I did when I slept. Kris and I would be trekking through The White for the next few days, likely

sleeping in a tent. The next village was a week away so the less I worried about my hair the better, and since I planned to not freeze to death in case my blessing decided my body could no longer acclimatise to the frigid weather of The White, I was quite particular about my attire.

My Deogn slip, the satin one-piece undergarment would serve as a good body temperature regulator, and the material of my long-sleeved green tunic provided extra protection around my thighs because of the length. I could also sleep in it if we found an inn on the road. I wore one of the three pairs of pants I owned, the other two just as sturdy and well-made were packed with the few other garments I had managed to procure here. Over those I wore the buckskin vest Taren had gifted me when I started hunting with him. The women of his clan made them by hand rather than blessing so it was considered an honour to receive such a gift. The way it wrapped around my waist and fastened at my hip reminded me of my old Deogn Robes, but the buckskin was far warmer which was why I'd worn it this morning after I discovered my guest.

With the cold finally seeping into my extremities, I pulled on my boots. I only owned one good pair and I never went anywhere without them. I then secured my shawl around my chest, the thick fabric providing that extra insulation against the cold, tying the knot securely at my lower back for easy release should the wind pick up and I needed a hood.

Last was my coat, a gift from Kris for this trip. It was graciously long, and the inside and collar was lined with snow fox fur, which at the time I had considered a strange gift from a Fox-Blessed Terrestrial.

When I'd asked Kris about it, informing her Deogn Brutes avoided products associated with their blessings, she said Kanahari were practical. Freezing to death in The White because she wouldn't wear fox because she was Fox-Blessed was idiotic. Kanahari didn't waste resources, the Eldertides didn't appreciate it. Fur meant warmth, and warmth meant survival in The White. Turned out her coat was the same.

The benefit of it being snow fox fur is that the animal had the uncanny ability to camouflage to its environment. It was grey, almost black when I wore it in town but in the snow, I practically vanished. The perfect coat for hunting in The White.

Krisenya had much simpler grooming habits than myself and would normally take about fifteen minutes to get ready. Since she hadn't appeared to comment on what she called my "over indulgences", it was very likely she still had her head buried in her pillow. But it was close to the eighth hour and if I didn't wake her from her drink-weary sleep, we would not reach our campsite before sundown. I tucked the pipeweed pouch I'd traded after breakfast securely into the inner pocket of my coat as I headed back to town.

The pouch cost me a strawberry pie recipe but it was worth it. It was Prean-made with treated leather and a magnetic snap seal, so it was both waterproof and watertight. Kris would love it. I'd been wanting to get her something in thanks for agreeing to take me across The White and as soon as I saw the Setrali matriarch using it for her smoking pipe, I knew it was the perfect present. And it would placate the angry fox I dared to wake in a few minutes.

"Get back!" The shout rang up the spring road.

"Watch out!"

"Don't move. Move and it will attack."

The distance between myself and the town square was too far for human eyes to properly gauge who was standing there. But my blessing allowed me to see with perfect clarity.

Tiny was in a defensive stance in the middle of the town square, at least seven people circled him, and not a calm face among them.

He had broken our rules. Rules that were designed to keep us safe, to keep him safe from being hunted, and to keep me safe from loose lips.

I reached out to him but was bombarded with incoherent spectrals, both familiar and not, and a sense of anger, confusion, frustration, and hunger. This was not good.

I ran as fast as my body would let me down the spring road, my breathing controlled and calculated. I reached the square just as a man with a snow shovel aimed at Tiny.

"No don't!" I shouted, putting myself in front of the man, keeping my distance from the growling grey wolf. Tiny may be my oldest friend, but he was still a wild animal and unless I took charge, I was the only thing standing between him and ripping out this man's throat. The man, the father from the Torvian family, looked over my shoulder a moment before I heard gravel move beneath feet to my right. I swung my head around to find one of the hunters had moved towards Tiny.

A growl rippled up my throat stopping the man in his tracks. Fear etched across his face.

"You do that," I said, my voice laced with warning, "and I can't stop him from killing you." His eyes glanced between the still-growling wolf and myself, his hands ringing the pole-axe he held. "Do that and I'll let him."

"Rieka?" Engar's voice came from the direction of the Old Man's Hearth.

"Get them to back off, Engar," I calmly suggested to my boss without breaking eye contact with the Torvian who was slowly losing his nerve. When he finally lowered the shovel, I carefully turned to Tiny, silently addressing him using the image of his name.

When his head turned in my direction, I made my approach, ignoring the startled voices behind me. The curious questions, the worried cries about a young woman approaching a wild wolf. The stupidity of the action. I ignored all of them.

Taking one step at a time, my back straight, my eyes fixed on my brother, I let a low grumble rise up my throat, directed at Tiny. He finally submitted, his head hanging low. The cacophony of spectrals vanished leaving behind a single clear distinct spectral that none but myself and my brother could see. A small white snow fox. The representation of my friend.

*Kris!*

"Engar, when is the last time you saw Krisenya?" I asked the innkeeper.

"Last night."

Someone whispered in a panic. "What is she doing, is she trying to get us all killed?"

The idiot with the pole-axe chose my momentary distraction to attack Tiny. The word shot from my mouth instinctively.

"Shueikhai." The man abruptly stopped, his pole-axe caught mid-strike, now unable to move. I only held onto the spell long enough for the man to realise what had happened before I released him. The weapon crashed to the ground as he backed away from Tiny and me, stuttering out a word of his own.

One I chose to ignore, even as the crowd's fear was now centred on me.

On *what* I had just revealed myself to be.

I knew I didn't have long until that fear turned to something else, so I sent Tiny the image of himself with his nose to the ground. He replied with another spectral. Two figures on horseback, the smaller figure was Kris. By scent and sight, it was her. She was still dressed in last night's clothes, her body draped over the saddle of the horse. Hands and feet bound. She looked unconscious, the tight curls of her white hair matted with leaves as though she had slept on the ground.

The taller figure, according to Tiny, had the scent of a man, but that was all the wolf could share. All I could ascertain from the spectral was that the man wore a hooded jacket, and the reins to Kris's horse were clasped in his gloved hand.

I ordered Tiny to track Kris' scent to the bottom end of town and wait for me there.

"Where's Taren?" I asked Engar, spinning around, ignoring the horrified faces of the terrified crowd. Whilst not always an accepted part of society, Blessed were expected to behave a certain way. Communing with animals verged on the taboo of behaviours. Their thoughts were more than enough to inform me I'd finally overstayed my welcome in Keltjar.

"He left with his hunting party hours ago," Engar replied as I strode towards the inn, the crowd parting abruptly to let me pass.

"When he gets back tell him someone's taken Kris. Tell him not to follow. I'll find her," I told the giant man, concern etched into his features. I rushed through the dining hall and up the stairs to my



room, the heavy steps of the Swine-Blessed man trailing behind me as he followed. "Rieka, what was that back there?"

I remained silent, stuffing the last of my things into the top of my pack.

"What do you think it was?" I knelt on the floor to reach under my bed, searching the frame for Etrina, my dagger. The tension in my shoulders eased when my hand found her hilt.

Engar's response was cautious. "I don't think I should say it."

Putting my boot up on the bed, I slid the small blade into the hidden sheath on the inside of my boot and replied. "Then don't say it."

It was instinct that had me speaking that *gaakriik*— the spell back in the square. Just like communing with Tiny had always come naturally, the *gaakriikta* had always just been there. I'd been young when I realised the danger of speaking that language aloud. A witness to the fear humans had for something that was not for human tongues. It was years later that I learned the truth of what the words meant. That I wasn't just an Apex Brute. I was something worse. Something defective and dangerous.

I'd heard the term enough in passing to expect the fear when humans suspected me, but I'd never been outright accused. I'd never been identified as one publicly before. Not even Kris or Taren had brought up the subject when I heard their suspicions in their thoughts. No. Hostile treatment of my kind was reserved for humans.

And for Devolved Humans like Engar, it wasn't uncommon to show hesitation. So, whilst he physically did not act differently towards me, his inner voice quivered ever so slightly. **"You're a T'eiryash."**

Lifting my pack over my shoulder, I moved back towards the door. When Engar moved aside to let me pass, I stopped before him. "Thank you, Engar. For the job. For everything."

I expected to smell fear on him, but instead, hollowness and the sting of sadness tainted the air between us. I didn't have time to dwell on it.

I placed a hand on his arm only when I knew he wouldn't rebuff the contact and bid him my farewell, hoping the Kanahari words

expressed what I could not. "May the Eldertides fill your home with meat and your hearth with warmth." The translation Kris taught me was simple but even I knew it failed to convey the sorrow that passed between us.

His hand slipped over mine in a comforting gesture. "May they guide you on your path and protect your dreams."

My throat tightened upon his words, guilt permeating the air as I dragged my eyes away from one of the few men who had shown me true kindness since fleeing Deos.

I was tightening the straps on a saddle in the stables when I heard his heavy footfalls again.

"Rieka." Engar stopped a foot away. "Here. It's what I was going to give you both before you left. For the road. Who knows when you would have found any food." It was a leather parcel tied with string, so I could not see what it held but I could smell it—smoked meat. I thanked him and tucked it inside my coat.

"Send word when you set up shop in Prea. I'm due for a vacation," he added as I mounted my horse.

"They don't let Blessed own businesses in Prea, Engar." I adjusted my grip on the reins.

"The world's changing every day Rieka. We have a new Emperor. Who knows what the future holds, just promise me you'll send word."

I assured him I would. Our gazes held for a moment and once again his inner voice quivered. This time in grief. ***"You're the closest thing I've got to a daughter. Don't go getting yourself killed."***

With tears threatening to emerge, I smiled and squeezed his hand. He sniffled and stepped back, patting his robust chest, a sign of his discomfort. "You best be going now. I don't need no scared townsfolk storming my inn demanding to cut your tongue from your mouth."

I laughed but it was humourless. He'd meant every word.

Stopping on the threshold of the barn doors, the scent of the encroaching Cleaving Party further encouraging my departure, I pulled the three Athusian Timars from my coat pocket and tossed

them towards Engar. "What's this for?" he asked catching the gold coins mid-air.

"The horse."

I kicked my heel into the horse's side, launching into a gallop out of the stable and down the mountain road, praying to the Eldertides that Tiny had found Kris' scent.

Tiny's sense of smell was nearly identical to my own, so when the fifteen-year-old grey wolf lost Kris' scent, so did I. It was dusk when we were forced to take shelter in a nearby cave, the former residents distant enough in time that the scent of their presence wouldn't bother Tiny.

We'd been together so long that settling in for the night in nature came naturally.

Since his body was more inclined to locate warmth than my own was, he found the warmest spot in the cave whilst I tethered my horse near the cave mouth and searched my pack for the Kindling Orb. Whilst being Wolf-Blessed allowed me to adapt to this weather, I was still a *hairless animal* as Tiny liked to remind me; particularly with a spectral of a hairless wolf that was no better than a plucked chicken. I still preferred the extra heat.

When I was younger, I'd tried using the spell to conjure fire to light my family's fireplace, but just like the rest of me, even that seemed to come out wrong. The fire nearly burnt down the house. Only the simplest spells ever seemed to abide by my intentions. I never knew if a spell would be benign or catastrophic in its effect, so it was safer when I ignored the words altogether.

Twisting the two halves of the sphere in my hands, I heard the flame inside ignite. The warmth of the fire contained inside the Kindling Orb began to ebb outward, instantly filling the cave cavity with warmth. Yet the surface continued to remain at room temperature. A feat of Prean technological ingenuity that cost me a week in the bed of a man that stunk like horse shit, but worth it on nights when my toes threatened to abandon my body to the winter chill.

With the cave heated and knowing we would have to leave at dawn if I wanted to retain any chance at locating Kris, I bedded

down beside the orb. Tiny was already in a prime position for *his companion* to lie against him and use his body heat for warmth in the night.

The first time we'd done this I had found him, a sickly runt guarding his pack's former cave because they had naturally abandoned him believing the pup too far gone to continue tending to him. He'd still held on hope that they would return for him. I, a girl of eight, had picked up the wolf pup and carried him back home and kept him in the cellar, without my parents' knowledge of course. I'd fed him milk, water, stock from a soup my mother had recently cooked, anything he would take. He'd been hesitant at first and hadn't understood why I smelled like a wolf but didn't look like one. I'd growled at him when he had nipped me for attempting to touch him after he had awoken. We were both surprised when he cowered at my growl. He took anything I offered him after that point, including the meat I had stolen from my mother's larder. I'd snuck out of my bedroom that night with blankets and crawled into position beside the weak wolf pup, who had hesitantly nuzzled into my chest.

"You must get better. You must grow big and strong," I'd ordered him.

At the time I didn't know he couldn't understand my words as he did now, but my intentions, my scent must have been clear. He sent me his first spectral, the language which animals like himself conversed in and one I'd soon learned none but myself could see.

A pair of tiny wolf paws.

It was his name. Tiny Paws.

We had been together ever since. When I left Deos, Tiny had been with me. Every man or woman I had managed to convince to take me wherever they were going, by whatever means necessary, Tiny had followed me. If my companion couldn't stand the company of my wolf, and most could not, he stayed close by, sometimes sneaking into whatever shelter I was sleeping in that night to keep me warm and departing before my human companion awoke. And if I slept under a roof with a naked body warming my bed, he was in the nearby woods delighting me with spectrals of his latest hunt.

The year we were separated was the hardest of my life.

I nestled into his fur. The moment I did he shifted, the softest of rumbles reverberating in his chest. His scent told me he was annoyed.

Detecting my confusion immediately, a spectral appeared. Two humans humping one another like animals. It was followed by another equally offensive spectral.

Tiny claimed I still smelled of my bed companion.

I replied with the memory of my morning bath. It did nothing to alleviate his distaste. I wasted no time then. Grabbing onto my brother, I shoved my head into his fur coat and rubbed against him roughly until I could feel the hair on my head rise and frizz.

I looked into his yellow eyes with raised brows.

*Insult me again old man and you insult yourself,* I wanted to say. Oh, the insults I could throw at him after *his* ruts in the woods, coming back smelling like a wet dog expecting to sleep in my perfectly dry tent.

I smelled of sex. It's not like I have not had that smell before.

He licked my face, bringing me back from my silent rant.

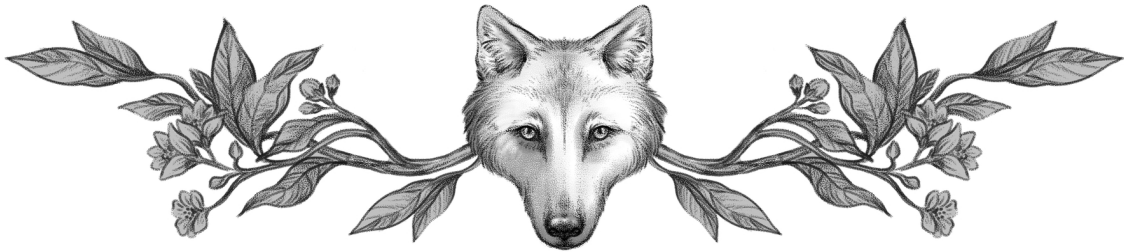
*Calm down,* his scent said. *I love you regardless of your choices to bed a hunter.*

Because that's what he scented my most recent companion was. A hunter. That second spectral he'd sent was not entirely accurate to the acts humans performed. Not in the least because the position he'd displayed in the spectral was more animal than anything I'd ever performed during sex. Least of all the fact he'd depicted my companion riding me whilst shooting a bow and arrow. Crudeness and propriety were foreign concepts to a wolf. I'd come to understand that years ago.

Tiny may be right though. My companion could very well have been a hunter. Frankly, I barely remembered anything from last night let alone asking him of his vocation. It would have been prudent to ask, what with the marriage ruse we kept up for several hours as we waited for Leon to drunkenly depart for his room.

We avoided hunters as a rule for Tiny's safety. A rogue wolf found close to a community always resulted in scenes like today.

I flooded the space around us with the scent of my love for him and snuggled once more into his fur. I felt him curl his head around mine as I tried to suppress the fear of failing the task that lay ahead of us come morning. A task we could not fail.



## RIEKA

There was a camp three days ride from Keltjar. We found it at sundown, hidden away in a clearing in the woods, the site illuminated by three large fire pits.

A wagon stood stationary by the edge of the clearing, timber with a domed roof like those I'd seen on my travels through The Green Waste. In a roped-off pen on its left, nearly two dozen horses grazed and from the number of scents I could detect at least six men and two women were present in the camp. Four tents spread along the circumference and within the centre were two box-like structures made of steel, the gap between them wide enough for the wagon to pass through. They appeared to be livestock pens.

The snow wasn't as thick this far from the base of the mountain. It had been six months since my feet had touched solid earth unhindered by ten inches of snow since winter never left The Hetra. And I was glad for it, both for the lack of snow and because we were able to follow their horse's tracks instead of just Kris' scent. But that man knew what he was doing.

On day two, he tried to disguise Kris' scent, hiding it beneath that of a deer hide. We had managed to stay at least a half-day behind them, choosing to continue through the night because our eyesight would allow it, but it rained on the third day, destroying any sign of

either of them except for Kris' tribal colours. Tiny had found the purple-dyed strip of hide that Kris wore in her hair to represent her tribe in a mud puddle this morning. Her scent ended there.

We'd been trying to find anything that might lead us to her when we stumbled upon the metal tracks. Following them led us to discover the camp.

Hidden twenty meters from the camp's edge, lying on the ground amongst the undergrowth, I watched the camp's inhabitants move about. I'd asked Tiny to search the area around the camp, to inform me of anything I would find odd, considering our differences of opinion on odd. Five minutes later, he sent a spectral of the inhabitants of one of the livestock pens.

*They are human.*

I sniffed at the air, refocusing my sight on the pens and my hearing on the sounds.

The smell of shit and piss mixed with the salt of freshly shed tears filtered through the steel crates. Grimy hands clung to the bars. Someone in the far corner muffled their sobs in the fabric of their clothes. I begged Tiny to keep searching the area, honestly hoping he found no sign of Kris here.

Damp leaves crushing under hooves caught my attention on the northern side of the camp. A rider accompanied by horses, each one accommodating a limp body.

He dismounted from his horse at the same moment the wagon door opened, revealing a tall skinny man. Face like a weasel and wearing a tan uniform, he greeted the rider with a word I'd only had to hear once in my life to know I never wanted to encounter it again.

"Bloodhound," the weasel said, the scent of repulsion leaking in waves off the man. "The Core welcomes you."

*A blood-wielder?*

The rider was a Bloodhound. A Hemopath who used his blessing against his own kind for money. They were the vilest of all Blessed. In Deos it was the Shadow Weaver that blessed them, in Athus it was Kyton the Red. Why they were blessed was a secret only those Gods knew. But there was one unified thought amongst all Blessed



when it came to their kind. The Blood-Blessed were dangerous. More than any water-wielding Current, or predatory Brute or even a light-wielding Bright.

A single drop of blood from any living creature and a Hemopath could track you from one side of the continent to the other and never lose the trace. They could boil a person's blood from the inside, and explode their hearts, all without touching their target. They wielded blood like a weapon. Literally. As the Emperor's personal security, The Red Guard of The Imperial City carried no weapons but their blessing. They could stop an enemy in their tracks and slice them through with nothing but their crimson blades.

The divisive decision even reached the ears of the priests in Deos. The several months of political upheaval in Prea when the young Emperor chose to grant them their own guild against the recommendation of the other guild heads, had caused The Servitors, the priests in the Celestial Offices, to remind Deos of the last time a blood wielder was permitted to live. The two years that followed involved an examination of every Blessed family to ensure no child had been Blood-Blessed.

But we were far from the Red Guard. And this man did not look like he was protecting anyone. The wagon door closed, so I shifted position to better hear the conversation inside.

They were speaking Kensillan. I recognised two of the words from my limited understanding of the language. Goods and payment.

I knew we had been near The Republic border but we hadn't crossed it yet. I was certain. Kensilla was the last place any Blessed wanted to be. If Prea was considered life to a Blessed, The Republic was considered death. Not a single Blessed had been alive in that nation since the Kensillan pantheon purged it after their Isles fell.

The Core loathed Blessed almost as much as Blessed loathed Bloodhounds.

Slinked over the saddles, I listened to the heartbeats of the other riders. Slow. They were unconscious. All but two campers ignored them. Both uniformed, they had been slowly making their way over to the horses when the wagon door opened again and the two occupants descended the stairs.

When the Bloodhound mounted his horse, a shout from the weasel instructed the men to pull the unconscious riders from their horses where they deposited them on the ground. Like they were sacks of dirty linen.

The largest of the unconscious riders took up a third of the space he'd fallen in, his large brown wings splayed out on the dirt like an iridescent fan over his back, their span twelve feet at least.

He was an Alatus Brute, a Talon to be more specific. Born with feathered wings, he was granted the ability to soar through the sky as if he were a hawk or an eagle. Like Taren.

Strange that I did not detect that about this man. I normally had no trouble determining someone's blessing.

No farewell was shared between the men and the Bloodhound before he departed for the forest once again.

The four Blessed lay unconscious on the clearing floor, the men staring down at them. The pungent odour of disdain poured out of them like an open tap. As the smaller of the two uniformed men approached the winged Brute, I noticed the object he carried. It looked like a double-sided clamp. He bent down and attached it to the wing's scapulars.

The sound of thick fabric being flapped open filled the silence. A woman emerged from one of the tents dressed in a similar uniform to the weasel, pants worn under a split skirt. Trailing behind her like two shadows were a pair of young women, their clothes plain and colourless, their heads shaved.

They walked with an odd gait. Rigid with quick steps, as though someone had screwed their spines to a pole. Yet their eyes were cast down. Like children who'd just been scolded.

The three women stopped before the pile of bodies. The uniformed one said something in Kensillan and as if in response, the two bald women faced forward.

Around their necks was a thick silver band that glistened under the Bright-lights of the camp. Another word from the uniformed woman had one of the bald ones kneeling. Leaning forward, she touched each one of the Blessed and a moment later, they awoke, their fear permeating the air.

The Alatus stood fast, his body bracing to launch into the air.

Humans were lucky they could not hear as we did. The sound of muscle as it was torn would turn their stomachs and invite the contents of their breakfast back up. Pain had a distinct scent. A smell so close to pleasure, some might call it sweet. I'd always found it left a tartness in the air, like vinegar mixed with milk.

The Alatus' agonised screams as he attempted to fly ripped through the air like a cleaver as the clamps on his wings forced them together to align with his spine. Refusing to let them expand. The more he fought, the more the muscles in his chest tore.

The uniformed woman addressed the Alatus in Preat. "Your Naven will see to it that your wings are repaired should they find you worthy of service."

Wings quivering limply from his back, the Alatus twisted in the dirt to look up at the woman. My chest tightened.

*Taren!*

It was him. The auburn hair plaited down his back with the purple dyed hide strip braided within, the colour indicating his tribe. The freckle under his eye. The clean-shaven face with the dimple in his chin and the small scar across his lip incurred when he'd slipped on ice and split it open.

Engar had passed on my message to him about Kris being taken and Taren hadn't listened to me.

He must have gotten captured by this Bloodhound trying to catch up to us.

The dark-haired woman beside Taren rushed to her feet, her hands moving in the way I'd only ever seen from a Pneumatic. I felt the gust of wind speed past me, then felt it die upon crossing the camp's threshold. My stomach twisted when a small smirk reached the corners of the collared woman's mouth as she stared at the Air-Blessed captive.

The collared women were Toxicants. A Charmer to control the Blessed and a Void to inhibit them. It explained why I hadn't scented Taren. Some Brutes' scents changed when they manifested their blessings. Others' blessings, like Taren's, overpowered their natural scent. It was all-encompassing. With the Void present, any hint of

the scent I'd come to know as his had been blocked from my senses. He may as well have been a stranger for what use my blessing was. I could do nothing to help Taren from out here. Even if I crossed the threshold of the Void's blessing, not only would I be even more incapable of using my own than I already was, but the Charmer would detect me.

*Useless as always, Rieka.*

As the weasel leader finally approached the group, a palpable fury perfumed the air. I had never felt that emotion from Taren before. Kanahari were pacifists. It wasn't in their nature to commit violence. Unless this weasel attacked him. I sent out a warning to Tiny in case he caught Taren's scent. To not follow it lest anything happen to him. He did not reply. I could only hope he was further than our bond allowed. Hopefully with Kris.

The weasel circled Taren with a scrutinising gaze. Entirely disregarding the pain it caused, the man forcefully examined Taren's wings, moving them to observe their width and breadth.

Hunting beside him had been the only time I had seen Taren's wings. It wasn't considered polite in Kanahari society to exhibit that side of oneself to an outsider. Now he was compelled to display them, his every movement snapping something in them.

I had to force my fury down, along with the bile in my throat.

When he'd finished with Taren—my friend left to kneel in a hunched-over gasping mess—the weasel proceeded to examine the Pneumatic woman. He inspected her with the grace of a child pulling worms from the dirt. He checked her face, her hands, her neck, probing every inch of the air-wielder. He examined her fucking ears, all whilst the smaller uniformed man recorded the leader's findings on a writing tablet he'd pulled from his coat pocket. When he reached the third Blessed, a younger woman, he pulled out a Bright-light and shone it in her face.

My stomach knotted again. He was watching for the colour refraction. Like animals, Brutes' eyes refracted light. Depending on the colour, these men would be able to determine which branch of Brute she might be.

The weasel spoke in Kensillan. When the girl didn't respond, he asked her a question in Deogn.

"What is your blessing?" The girl did not answer, so he repeated it in Prean. "What is your taint?"

The girl again refused to answer. The weasel-faced leader stepped backward and as if rehearsed, one of the campers punched her in the stomach. She fell to her knees with a groan, her breath wheezing out of her. Unsatisfied with the pain he had already caused the woman, the same man lifted her by the arm to her feet, and only when she had regained her footing did he punch her again.

This time they got their desired result. The young woman revealed herself to be a Terrestrial, a Brute of the prey variety. The long ears reminiscent of a hare emerged on the top of her head as her human ears disappeared behind an expanding fur-covered hairline.

The smaller man made a note on his tablet.

*Bastards!*

It was common knowledge that Brutes could be forced to manifest their blessing under duress. Papa called it a *trauma response*. When it had occurred with Engar, it was merely caused by Taren surprising him. There had been no malicious intent. The method these men were using on the young woman was abhorrent. Pain-induced manifestation was intentionally cruel.

They left her to writhe on the ground, breathless whilst they turned their attention to the fourth Blessed. A young man. Barely a man. The weasel examined him with a fixed expression. A conversation was being had. First the Void, then the uniformed woman until finally the weasel pulled a knife from his belt, took the arm of the Terrestrial woman and sliced open her wrist.

The wolf in me crooned at the scent.

He let the young woman drop to the floor without so much as a glance, her screams panicked as she frantically tried to stop the blood gushing from her open vein.

"Heal her."

The boy stuttered out something along the lines of "I don't have those skills."

The weasel gave the boy a cold look before he turned back to the girl. He yanked her up violently by the other arm and slit that wrist too.

"Her death is on you, boy."

The dark-haired boy's tall frame shook as he fell to his knees, his hands quivering as they hovered over the dying Terrestrial. The girl grew ever paler. In a panic, failing to do as he was told, he stood and walked right into the chest of one of the uniformed men. He took a step back and wiped his hands on his coat before returning to his knees once more, pressing a hand over each wrist. Elation and relief fell over the young man's features as colour slowly returned to the girl's face.

I'd experienced mending by an Organic before, felt how their Blessing wriggled inside of you. Finding the broken parts and making them new again, the scars—they vanished everywhere but in your mind. Some say they should stick to growing plants. I'd hazard a guess that was all this boy had done before tonight.

If the Terrestrial had wanted to thank him her attempt would have been cut short. One of the men grabbed hold of the boy and carted him off to the weasel's wagon. Taren, the girl, and the Pneumatic woman were forced into the livestock pens less than a minute later.

I remained where I was for another hour, trying to get back into contact with Tiny when a second Bloodhound, followed by a third entered the camp, both accompanied by a group of Blessed. Each one was just as unable to fight back as the last, all thanks to their Blood-Blessed captors.

I'd been so focused on the camp that I'd barely noticed my surroundings until movement in the tree above caught my attention. My entire body went cold.

A black raven sat on the lowest branch. Sleek ebony feathers and bottomless eyes.

*You're fine, Rieka. There is no one behind those eyes any longer. Keep it together.*

I took a deep breath and looked back at the camp, only for the exhale to catch in my throat.

Five feet from where I lay, iridescent wings glimmering in the evening light, a moth fluttered before the Bright-light.

*In divine reverence, I ask the—*

I stopped myself.

I had not prayed to a Celestial, one of my gods, in over a year. The last thing I needed was the attention of the Deogn God of Endings by speaking her prayer.

*A godly Omen cannot exist where the God that gives it power treads not.* I repeated the Preat Proverb several times to remind myself of my choice. To not give them that power over me.

A flash of white drew my gaze away and I saw a little white fox bounding towards me. A spectral from Tiny. He had found Kris. The sudden relief I felt at the news twisted acutely in my stomach. *How do I even begin to explain to Kris what has happened to her brother?*

The thought quickly vanished as another group emerged from the tree line.

Three horses entered the camp accompanied by a Bloodhound on the fourth, two Blessed slung over the saddles. On the last one, a deer hide covered a petite body, white curls long enough to touch the forest floor.

*Krisenya!*

Pipe smoking, drinking game enthusiast, terrible singing voice Kris. Unlike her brother, her scent was unmistakable. Spiced mead and peppercorns.

There was another scent I recognised.

Damp soil and pine needles. The forest after rain.

The Bloodhound who'd kidnapped her from Keltjar wore a black eye mask and a red leather jacket, but I knew who he was.

Fury burned as it rose up my throat, my stomach churning violently.

I could not stomach to think of his name.

*The Lycoan is a godsdamned Bloodhound!*

I had to clench my jaw to stop from growling. I warned Tiny to remain wherever he was hiding just as the sound of hands smacking

on metal came from the stock pen. Taren had seen his sister, his shouts and cries ignored by the captors.

The Bloodhound disappeared into the wagon as the captors approached once again but did not touch the Blessed.

The raven above released a cry, causing all the hairs on my arms to stand on end.

Kris and Taren were prisoners of these people, and I couldn't just watch and do nothing.

Spells floated to the surface of my mind, dangerous pain-inflicting gaakriikta. A temptation that I was utterly aware of was being fuelled by my desire to save my friends. But it was nothing compared to my own fear. Humans think that my kind have no fear until a Cleaving, but that is incorrect. At least for me.

It was not the innocents who might suffer, nor that my friends may be caught in the crossfire that I feared. It was the thought that speaking the spell aloud would prove humans right. That I was the monster they told their children about in bedtime stories.

And I'd made an oath.

To never inflict my will on another being by force. Even to the benefit of others. And there was no knowing what would happen if I let a single gaakriik of that sacred language passed through my lips. No good had ever come from my knowing Gods' Tongue.

Footsteps sounded in the wagon.

His footsteps.

My hand slipped down to my thigh. *Fuck it. You can meet Etrina inste*—A thousand razor blades of white-hot pain sliced through my body. My muscles convulsed violently as gloved hands grabbed my arms, the toes of my boots dragging through the dirt.

I was brought to my feet, my body still twitching because of whatever they had struck me with.

*I'm going to puke.*

I swallowed.

Beside me, one of the unconscious Blessed shifted, his face twitching as though in a dream, a dark birthmark in the shape of holly over his eyebrow. Somehow, I knew he was a Kindling— a Blessed capable of producing extreme amounts of heat from his



body. I also knew the man unconscious beside him was a metalworking Smith. I'd always been able to tell a blessing by scent. What was odd was that I was able to discern them from within the reach of a Void's blessing, especially when according to all lore, my senses should be no better than a human's right now.

I looked up, the edges of my vision blurred and I saw the Void shaking her head, her expression startled and fearful as her gaze flickered between the uniformed woman and myself. She appeared as surprised as I was that my senses seemed unaffected by her blessing.

I could smell Taren in the pen, could smell Kris beneath the deer pelt, and even the bastard in the wagon.

The uniformed woman took my chin in her hand harshly and examined my face. If it wasn't bad enough that she was touching me, she proceeded to shift my shawl from where it was wrapped around my chest to examine my neck. She rubbed her thumb along the raised skin of the scar that stretched across my throat. Pain was the only reason I didn't attempt to bite her hand off.

Satisfied, she turned her attention to my eyes. Holding my face in a hard long-fingered grasp, the uniformed woman flashed her Bright-light across my eyes. Her brows creased. More Kensillan words left her lips directed over her shoulder to the Void who replied, eyes downcast as her expression remained confused. She asked me the same questions the leader had Taren, first in Deogn, then in Prean. Neither one I answered.

She scoffed, her gaze unnerving me in the way it examined me now. I'd seen men look at me that way. Like she was imagining what I would look like naked.

The sound of a door hinge caused her gaze to falter, and she stood straighter as she looked over to the wagon.

The Bloodhound stood on its steps. Even in his mask, I could feel his eyes on me. It took every ounce of control I had not to go to him, to not pull Etrina from my boot and run him through with her steel. I could do it, but there was nothing stopping me from going further. Doing worse with no idea if I could stop.

*I'm nothing but a Brute incapable of controlling her blessing.*

The red-jacketed bastard deposited a large coin purse into his pocket before he finally broke eye contact with me. He then casually strolled back over to Kris, untethering her horse from the others.

I could hear the weasel-faced leader approaching but I didn't care. The Bloodhound had Kris and he was taking her with him.

"Where are you taking that one?" one of the captors addressed him in Preat, the other Blessed now in their possession.

"Private Acquisition."

Another look came my way through the mask. "I wouldn't bother with that one. She's human."

The leader exchanged a look with one of his men and once again razors sliced at my body. When the object of my pain released me, my body, incapable of remaining upright, collapsed onto the forest floor. The man who hovered above me held the cause of my pain. A long metal baton, the end crackling with blue energy, with tiny little bolts of lightning.

A Spark-made weapon.

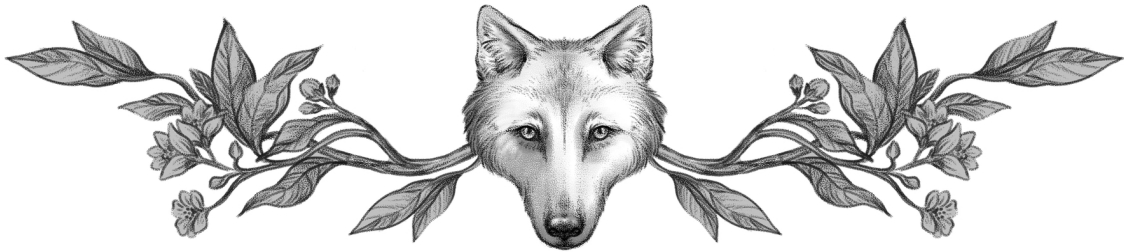
From the ground with the taste of dirt in my mouth I could see that piece of shit Bloodhound mount his horse, the reins of Kris's mount in his gloved hand. I sent Tiny a message to follow Kris, to save Kris if he could.

He gave me one last look. I used the opportunity to memorise his face, everything I recalled that was under that mask. Those blue eyes, that nose, the shape of his face under that beard, and those lips. Those traitorous unmoving lips.

The tone of his inner voice caught me off guard as he voiced a rather confusing thought.

***"In another life, I would have chosen you instead."***

Another shock sent me into unconsciousness.



## RIEKA

I awoke with my hands and feet bound.  
**"Rieka!"**

I shifted at Taren's voice, rolling on my side to find him being involuntarily ushered towards the open doors of a train carriage, resting on the tracks that led me here.

*"Taren, where are they taking you?"*

***"The Republic. One of the other captives says we're to become Thralls, servants of the Kensillan upper class."***

*Slaves.*

I moved to sit up.

***"No don't move. They think you're human. Keep it that way."***

*"What about you, what about Kris?"*

***"We have the Eldertides to keep us safe. Don't you worry about us. Worry about yourself."***

*"Stop with your damned spirits! They didn't protect you from being captured, did they?"*

***"They led me to my sister which was all I asked of them, they will protect me should I ask that of them too."***

*"Taren, I am so sorry. About everything. It's all my fault."*

Even his inner voice was utterly sympathetic, consoling when it ought to be furious. ***"You did not move my feet for me Rieka. I hold no grudge against you, nor would my sister."***

How could two people born of different parents, of different Blessings, be so similar in nature? I'd thought they were joking when Kris introduced Taren to me as her elder brother.

Where Krisenya was pale and petite, possessing the bright blue eyes of a snow fox and the countenance of a drill sergeant, Taren was stoic. His body was lean and tall, his face freckled, his hair as dark a brown as the feathers on his wings and his own eyes, a falcon golden brown. They looked nothing alike. If I had encountered Taren anywhere other than The Hetra, I would have expected a Deogn accent, not a Kanahari one.

Yet they were both giggly drunks, both terrific hunters and would both swear the Eldertide of the moon would turn it red if they prayed to it long enough. It was just another thing I'd learn about how small my world had been in Deos, how tainted my perception had been of the nations and countries beyond my home's borders.

***"May the Eldertides fill your home with meat and your hearth with warmth,"***Taren lamented.

My throat stung, the desire to cry constricting.

*"I have neither home nor hearth you silly man."*

***"Then I ask them to guide you to it, wherever it may be."***

Another uniformed man inside the carriage took hold of Taren and lifted him in. He was the last of the Blessed to be transferred inside. A moment later they slid the giant door across and sealed him away in that dark box.

*"Taren, can you hear me?"*

***"I am still here, Rieka."***

*"I will follow the train when they release me."*

***"Do not be so foolish."***

*"Have you met me? I'm not foolish, I'm a planner. And I plan to find you again. I promise."*

***"Don't make promises you can't keep."***

*"I never do."*

The train jolted into motion, and all I could do was watch as the second person I trusted with my life was taken from me.

I let my tears fall silently into the forest floor.

Hurried and determined footsteps approached, the figure stopping by my head. Their silhouette was illuminated by the night sky above, a face half-cast in the glow of firelight. A conversation passed between one figure and another. It was the uniformed woman and the weasel-faced leader.

A quick flick of her hands and I was lifted onto my feet by one of the men, dragging me the distance of the camp. Ahead of us, a second man unravelled a long rope.

He threw it over the limb of the nearest tree.

They were going to hang me. Because I wasn't what they needed and because of what I'd witnessed, they were going to kill me and make it look like a suicide.

It wasn't even uncommon in this part of the world. Lost travellers and lost souls. Murdered souls. I'd passed through one of the hanging forests before I'd met Leon on my way to The Hetra.

Gods, I'd been so naïve.

I kicked out at my restraints, fighting the hands that wrestled me in place, the ropes burning where they rubbed my wrists, snapping as they broke. But they were stronger than I was right now. My heartbeat thundered in my chest when the rope touched my neck.

And when the air was cut off from my lungs, when my body was yanked up by the neck, my fingers clawing at the rope, the pressure in my head excruciating, I could only hear the silent scream in my mind.

The sound of ripping flesh drowned out my scream. My body collided with the cold earth, my legs noncompliant beneath me.

A dying man wailed in agony by my feet. The man who had held the rope was now lying in a pool of his blood, choking on it, Tiny's muzzle buried in the man's intestines.

Tiny ran to the other figure beside me, leaping onto the terrified man, jaw snapping shut on his throat. Shouts spread across the camp, but all I could see was my wolf. My amazing, lifesaving, and very angry wolf.

A low whistle sliced through the air.

I saw the axe too late.

The sound of cold steel as it cleaved through warm flesh was unmistakable. The first time you heard it, the sound imprinted in your mind. An unremovable tattoo on your memory.

Tiny lay motionless on the forest floor beside the dead captor, the axe embedded in his side. His whines pierced my heart. Throwing the rope from my neck, I rushed to his side.

He was terrified. Pain and anguish flowed like a river from him, spectrals flashing past my vision, one by one until they slowly started to flicker away. Tears poured down my cheeks as my hands grasped his fur.

"No no no no no no no no."

*Please come back to me. Someone, please bring him back.*

"No no no no no."

I was ripped away from my brother, strands of my hair tearing out by the root. His final spectral, the image of a little girl smiling at me, her hand outstretched, flickered out.

Everything went black.



Blood covered my hands.

The clearing stunk of it.

I could taste it on my tongue.

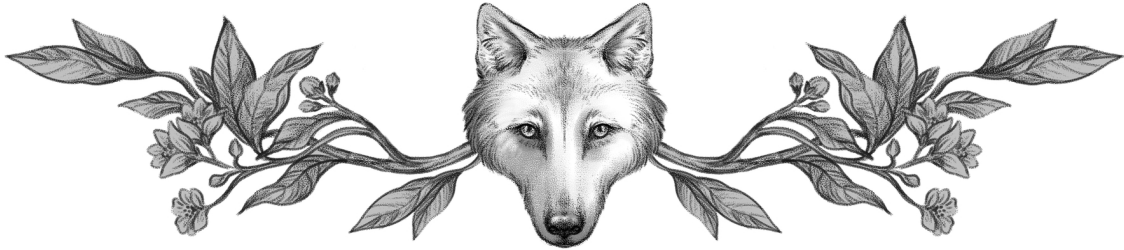
Standing before me were the two survivors of the massacre I had just committed, the short one and the uniformed woman. A gaping tear stretched the length of her cheek.

Their Spark-made weapons pointed at me.

Their companions, their leader ripped apart all around us, limbs strewn in ravenous delight.

My chest heaved.

My ears beat like a drum.  
Something moved to my right.  
I looked right into the face of the Charmer.  
Her cold hand touched my cheek.  
Once again everything went black.



## RIEKA

Tiny was dead.

He was dead. Taren was to be a slave, and Kris was gods knows where with that Bloodhound.

Private acquisition he had called her, as though she were a piece of art to be bought and sold.

I was to blame. Had I not agreed to that stupid drinking game—with him—and instead encouraged Kris to sleep early, we'd be on our passage through The White right now, and Taren would still be home safe in Keltjar.

They should have never trusted me.

*I'm a monster. All I do is hurt people.*

My mother.

My brother.

Tiny.

I unfurled my fist.

The grey fur remained unblemished. Soft and clean. Somehow, even in that state, I'd managed to keep the blood splatter from marring the grey as they had ripped me from him.

Why hadn't he listened to me? If he had just done as I'd asked, he'd be alive.



*Then you'd be the rotting corpse, hanging from a rope in the forest.*

But he'd be alive.

Shifting my weight on the train compartment floor where they had secured me, the metal of the wall cold even through my coat, I reached around for the end of my plait. The leather string fell away with ease, the long white strands falling loose over my shoulder.

The shackle chain provided just enough range of movement to wind the string around the wad of fur, securing it with a knot my father had taught me. The discomfort it exerted on my wrist was a grain of sand compared to the crushing avalanche of pain in my chest. The pipe-weed pouch still tucked in my coat pocket would be the perfect place to secure it. Opening the magnetic clasp, I placed inside the only piece of my brother the world had sought to grant me and let the clasp close with a snap.

Had I managed to hold onto Kris' tribal colours, I would have stored that inside too. But I'd lost it somewhere between getting captured and tearing the slavers apart.

Opposite me, a woman yanked on her shackles, the third time since we had awoken in the train compartment. The slavers, because that was what they were, had deposited me here after the Charmer had knocked me unconscious.

I had expected to wake in the City of the Dead, my soul devoured by Veliah because the gods had deemed it unworthy of residing in the God Sphere with the devoted ones.

I was not to become a star in the heavens.

No. I, Rieka Nicora, was exactly where I deserved to be. On the floor of an empty cargo train compartment, shackled like the monster I was. Fear had been my greeting when I'd awoken on the train, its savoury scent causing whatever vestiges of the monster that had emerged in the slave camp to rumble in satisfaction.

The whimpers of a woman had caused all sense of reality to come crashing down, and the scent of blood, caked to my skin like dried dough rid me of any semblance of denial I could have clung to.

I might have deserved to be a prisoner for my crimes, but I doubted the others shackled on the walls around me did. The young

woman opposite me looked barely nineteen and so thin, a jolt from the train would likely have her bones breaking if she collided with the wall.

There were eight of us spread out at equal intervals, two women to our right and four men to our left. My senses told me they were Blessed too.

The compartment had only one door. An unwelcome sign.

The woman opposite shifted to her knees, placing her hands on the wall, eyes closing upon contact with the steel.

"Do you feel something?" the man to her left asked. She ignored him.

I watched her for several seconds before a scent drew my focus to the far end of the train.

One of the men had his hands clasped around his shackles and where he gripped them, the chain grew red hot. Molten metal dripped through his fingers and pooled at his feet until the chain fell away from the man, striking the wall like a gong, his hands left blackened but uninjured.

He was a Kindling. Though not the one that piece of shit Bloodhound had sold to the slavers.

The man opposite pleaded for the same to be done to his chain, but the Kindling ignored him, instead choosing to search his pockets for something. He pulled out a piece of flint, his face expressing his relief.

Tiny detested Kindlings. Ever since he'd snuck up on one's campfire to pinch a pheasant they'd hunted. He'd been caught, a whip of flame from the campfire blasted at him by the Kindling. He'd had a bald patch on his back leg for the last five years.

The avalanche in my chest finally made land. The realisation that any thought of him would not be met with one of his spectrals caused my throat to tighten, the sting of unshed tears clawing at it. I fisted my coat, the fabric clenched so tightly my knuckles turned white.

A low hum began to fill the compartment.

I let it distract me. The woman, still kneeling had paused her searching of the wall three feet above where her chain was

fastened. The area around her hand began to emit a blue glow, and for a split second, I doubt anyone else saw, minute crackles of blue lightning shot out.

She was a Spark.

*A Kindling, a Brute, and a Spark. There's a joke in there somewhere. Something about a bar?*

There was a loud pop.

All the shackles clicked open.

"Thank you," said one of the other captives to the Spark as they rubbed at their wrist. Judging from her expression, I doubted freeing everyone was her intention.

The man opposite the Kindling walked over to the doorless compartment wall, hands searching it like the Spark had, eventually pressing his ear to it. "Does anyone know why they put us here?"

I watched the Spark as her attention turned from the captives. She was gazing around, searching for something, her eyes darting left and right. She bore the same shaved head as those women from the camp. The skin around her neck shone like an old scar, right where one of those collars might rest from years of wear.

A bell chimed and the Spark flinched, her fear spiking.

Whilst the others all searched for the source of the bell, the Spark only had eyes for the doorless wall.

*She knows something.*

There was a crackle followed by a female voice that was far too cheerful under the circumstances. "Five seconds until Registration Commences. Five."

The Spark's heart rate spiked again. She moved to the centre of the compartment but remained focused on the wall, the slightest quivering to her hands the only visible indication of her fear.

"Four." The entire back wall of the carriage slid up to reveal another room in the compartment. Eight figures approached the opening but stopped short of entering. I stood, hesitant that I could not smell the newcomers and caught sight of a glimmer in the opening before the figures.

There was a glass panel dividing the compartment.

"Three."

The Kindling backed away from the glass when he realised what I had. The other passengers were carrying weapons. One a sword, another an arm-mounted crossbow and someone was looping a whip around their hand.

"Gods!" someone exclaimed in terror.

I made a move to back away but noticed that the Spark hadn't. She was still waiting, still watching so I kept myself in line with her. Her chest heaved, panic perfuming the space around her, yet she did not flee. She only had eyes for those other passengers.

Whatever was about to happen, she was expecting it.

"Two." Slowly, the Spark turned around, facing her back to the glass panel. Much to my surprise, she glanced at me. Her eyes locked on mine.

"One." I heard a click.

The glass panel lifted at the same time three others slammed down, dividing the compartment into four glass cells. The scent of blood enveloped the air as one of the female captives screamed to my right. One panel had landed right on top of the woman between us, slicing her clean in half.

At the back of the carriage, the armed passengers had moved into the first cell, where one of them had impaled the male captive.

We were being hunted.

The third woman, sealed in the end cell, frantically searched for a handle to the compartment door, a sigh escaping when her hand slipped into a hidden panel.

The Spark watched her intensely.

Relief washed over the woman's face when her arm slid in further. Even in the chaos of the moment, she was able to concentrate, a hundred expressions crossing her features.

The sound was quick, like a butcher's cleaver. The woman didn't even jump. A slow scream crawled up her throat as she withdrew her arm in abject horror. Half of it was missing.

The door swung open at the same moment I heard another click and the glass panels lifted. The Spark bolted through the open door, leaving the woman on the floor, the artery in her arm gushing her life's blood. The two male passengers thundered up beside me,

stopping just inches in front of where the panel once again slammed down.

White-hot heat thickened the air, scorching it, and making my eyes water.

The cell behind me was engulfed in flame. The Kindling, had ignited it. I waited for the glass to shatter, for the flames to sear into my skin and scar my bones black. But it remained steadfast. As if it was designed for this exact purpose.

When the fire was out, the Kindling was the only one left standing in his cell, five burnt husks at his feet. I didn't need to scent them to know the surviving *Hunters* were angry.

I heard the click once more and moved without waiting, the panel lifting as I approached it. The Kindling's scream bounced off the glass at the same moment an arrow embedded itself in the injured woman's eye, pinning her to the wall. I passed through the carriage doorway and into pitch darkness just as her heart stopped, the sound of three Hunter's footsteps behind me suddenly muted as the glass panels closed again.

The slope of the floor was immediately apparent—to me. The two surviving male passengers unable to stop their motion of force like myself, continued forward until they crashed into the other end. Familiar with the dark, my eyes adjusted. We stood in another carriage, this one devoid of any exit.

The air here was stagnant with cleaning chemicals, the scent of blood barely discernible beneath it. But enough to know death occurred here often. I needed to find the Spark. She knew what was going on. My best chance for survival was her. But she wasn't on the ground with the two male captives. Instead, I found her twenty feet up, climbing the wall. And a few feet to her left was the door.

The sound of feet scuffing metal told me the Hunters had finally emerged into the carriage.

I ran to the wall, unsettled by their meandering pace into the sloping compartment.

"Climb," I told the two men, one of which had already gauged what I had. There were slits in the surface of the wall, some deep, some protruding—hand holds that we could climb to reach the door.

So, I climbed. Up and left or up and right, whichever movement got me closer to escape.

Light filled the carriage like the dawn sneaking into a cave. The Spark had reached the door. I risked a look down before the light vanished. The Hunter who stood below me flicked their hand up and within seconds I felt his whip wrap around my ankle. He yanked down. Wrenched from the wall, I fell, the air pushed from my lungs as I collided with the hard steel floor. It took everything in me not to panic.

*"The air will return."* I heard my father's voice. *"If you are winded, don't panic, the air will return. Think of what comes next. If you fall, get back up. If you're being attacked, find a weapon."*

The Hunter's feet on the carriage floor quickened my heart rate. With my lungs burning, desperately trying to get air, I reached down to my boot's hidden sheath to grasp Etrina's hilt. My scalp screamed as his hands pulled at my hair, ripping it at the root as he yanked me back.

I swung up and slammed my dagger into his neck.

The Hunter gurgled, blood oozing from his mouth.

Like fresh rain, his blood splattered my face when I pulled Etrina from his throat, the black handle glistening where the crimson had kissed it.

I didn't need to see him die to know he would. Etrina may have failed her former owner, but she had never failed me.

Jumping to my feet, and with no Hunter approaching, I returned to climbing the wall, the ascent only getting easier when air finally passed through my lungs with ease.

Someone grunted to my left.

In the darkness, I saw one of the male Blessed, face-to-face with another Hunter, a knife buried in the former's gut. A look of excitement filled the Hunter's face until the Blessed reared their head back and impaled a pair of long, sharp fangs into the Hunter's neck. Both of their grips went slack, and they fell fifteen feet to the ground where the sound of a skull cracking ricocheted off the walls. Moments later two heartbeats were gone.

Light filled the carriage once more and I looked up to find a figure pass through the doorway, followed by a second before the light was once again snuffed out.

I was alone. I contemplated staying here in the dark, but something told me that I wouldn't stay alone for very long.

With Etrina back in my boot, I climbed the last few meters until I found a release button. The door popped open with a mechanical whirring, and I hefted myself up and inside.

There must be some type of compartment seal between each carriage. Magnetics perhaps. Whatever it was, it screwed with my senses. I only knew up was up because my feet were on solid ground. Pushing through the space until my ears popped, I found myself standing in a regular train carriage. At least by my estimation. Trains were nothing but monuments to the past in Deos, viewed from behind a window.

Leather cushioned chairs lined each side in neat rows, with luggage racks overhead and an aisle down the middle. And at the centre of it were two people in the midst of a brawl. The Hunter and the last surviving male Blessed. Beyond them, her nose very obviously broken, was the Spark. She was reciting something as she climbed over a chair towards another wall with no door.

Her mumblings sounded like Old Kenar, Kensillan numbers maybe.

Something snapped.

Eyes now on the Hunter, I saw the Blessed he'd been fighting go limp and fall to the floor, his neck snapped. The Hunter turned his attention to the Spark, slowly stepping over the dead body.

"Leave her alone!" I shouted.

*Great idea, make yourself the target instead!*

The Hunter turned, his gaze hungry even for a human, and he grinned, obliging my stupid request.

Over his shoulder, the Spark scuttled down onto the floor, shifting to lie on her back, her feet raised up the wall.

My stomach flipped as the compartment somersaulted sideways, the floor rolling beneath me. The cold steel of a chair crashed into my ribs, the grunt of the Hunter as he collided with the wall was an echo of my own cries. I attempted to regain my footing, but the

carriage lurched sideways again and I rolled down the wall, colliding with the underside of the luggage rack.

The Spark moved fast, rushing towards the luggage rack, perching atop it like a cat until she had her fingers gripping the underside.

The Hunter, now spotting the Spark, attempted to crawl towards her now that the carriage was stationary. He didn't make it three feet before a jet of blue lightning shot from her outstretched hand, a black scorch mark marring the wall where he had just been.

The carriage shifted again. I barely had enough time to realise the direction had changed, the carriage rotating vertically instead of rolling. My chin landed with a snap on the underside of the luggage rack just as I managed to grasp it, the hard mesh cutting into my fingers. My shoulders screamed where the muscles had been violently used to stop me from falling down the length of the train, my reflexes the only reason it was the Hunter and not myself screaming in agony from the bottom of the carriage.

Above me, the Spark, having climbed the length of the rack, was hanging from the door handle, strain etched into the lines of her pale face.

Pushing off the rack, bracing myself so the pressure was on my feet and not my hands, I climbed the eight feet of rack, the sound of the Hunter climbing enough of an incentive to move.

I pulled myself into a standing position on the end. There was nothing for me to grab onto. The Spark hung from the only handle.

The carriage lurched, so I jumped—

A hand caught mine. I glanced up, surprised to see the Spark.

The carriage flipped another 180 degrees, and I swung violently into the roof of the carriage, but the Spark never let go of my hand. When the carriage came to a stop, the two of us now on the bottom of the carriage, she pulled me to my feet. We were now standing on the door.

There was a series of clicks that caused the hairs on my arms to rise. My stomach lurched half a second before the door snapped open under us. As I fell, I caught sight of the last Hunter. He hung limp between two rows of chairs, his neck bent at the wrong angle.



We landed with a resounding thud, the noise echoing off the walls like a steel drum. Dampness saturated the back of my head. I touched there, hoping the numbness I felt wasn't a giant crack in my skull. Instead of blood, I found water.

We were lying in a puddle of water. Above us, the door snapped shut.

The floor began to vibrate, the room rumbling as if a stampede of bison were approaching. The sound was coming from a large hole in the wall in front of me, the stampede growing louder with each second. I had barely risen to my feet when water erupted from the mouth of the hole.

"Help me!" the Spark cried out in Preat. She stood, holding on to a lever in the wall opposite the river mouth, a round doorway beside her. On its right was another lever.

I tried to run but the fast-rising water level made it difficult, so by the time I reached the lever my clothes were thoroughly soaked through. To add to my frustration, the lever wouldn't budge no matter which way or how hard I yanked on it.

"Do you know how it works?" I asked the Spark, realising she'd stopped touching her lever.

"We have to wait." She nodded towards a point on the floor that was underwater.

"You knew what was going to happen didn't you?" I shouted, the rushing water drowning out our voices.

"They make us watch."

"Who?" I shouted louder.

"The Naven—the masters. They make us watch."

*That's sadistic.* I asked her *why* instead.

"The Core wills it," she shouted back, almost insulted I couldn't comprehend her words.

The Core. She was speaking of the gods of the Republic. The same gods who, five centuries ago, had declared all Blessed in Kensilla were to be rounded up and executed. The Spark wasn't the only one to mention The Core. The weasel-faced slaver had mentioned them too, when he greeted the Bloodhounds.

So the slavers *were* Kensillan, which meant that was where Taren had been taken, and maybe where Kris was too. I could work with that. If I lived through this.

"Why do we have to wait?" I wasn't entirely sure I wanted an answer.

"It is a pressure plate. The water must fill the entire room before we can pull the levers." Now it made sense. Why she had saved me. She couldn't do it alone. If I had been killed by the Hunter or died falling, she would most definitely have drowned.

Under the same circumstances, were I her and aware of just how dire my situation was, I'd probably have done the same thing.

The anticipation was worse than the water itself. The frigid temperature, the chattering of my teeth. I was likely to die of the waiting before water ever filled my lungs. By the time it reached my shoulders, I estimated ten minutes had passed and another five before we'd had to paddle to the surface, our heads skimming the roof.

"Remember," the Spark said before we took our final breath. "Pull out then push down."

The water slipped up over our heads, all sound muffled by the water as it was impacted by the rushing torrent. I heard the plate release and dove down, using my hands to pull me along the wall to the lever. I was a good swimmer but even as a Wolf-Blessed Brute, my eyesight was godsdamned useless underwater. I was forced to trust my hands.

Finding the lever, I braced myself against the wall like I had the luggage rack and pulled. It released with a jolt and I pulled for what felt like an eternity until it was parallel to the floor. With my heart beating loudly in my ears and the pressure from the lack of air building in my head, I did as she had said. I spun in the water and pushed the lever down until it was flush with the wall.

A muffled mechanical noise reverberated within the water like the motor of an engine. A bright light emerged on the opposite wall and I swam for it, though I had little hope I'd make it before my eyeballs imploded in my skull.

Cold metal kissed my cheek. The ridged iron of a steel plate floor beneath my hands oddly comforting. Icy air lashed my face as I desperately tried to breathe.

I'd passed through another of those magnetic shields, one which kept the water at bay. Pity it hadn't taken the dampness of my clothes with it.

*Gods!*

The pouch.

I searched my coat for the pipe-weed pouch, snapping it open the moment it was in my hands. Tiny's fur was perfectly dry. Untouched by the events I'd just undertaken. Relief washed over me like a warm blanket and I returned the pouch to my pocket.

Only then, when I'd calmed down did I notice the scent that had been slowly filling the new compartment. The scent of dread, an acute smell that left a thick layer at the back of your throat. Fatty like oil.

"I thought the decision would be easy." The Spark's voice was meek. Far from the strength she had displayed earlier.

She stood on the edge of a large opening in the carriage wall, where a door should have been. The world beyond flashed by. Blurs of green and the scent of pine were the only giveaway to the forest beyond.

She stared blankly at it, body drenched in water, the scent of salt in the air the only indication of the tears she shed. In her hand, the steel glittering in the moonlight was a curved blade. A weapon she had not had a few minutes ago.

I rose to my feet carefully, trying not to spook her. "Come away from the edge, you don't want to do that."

Her gaze fell over her shoulder as her grip on the weapon's handle tightened. "I don't want to do that either." Along the opposite wall, as if on display, were weapons. Daggers and chains, swords and several weapons I'd only ever seen depicted in books were mounted on racks.

Our captors wanted us to fight each other.

"Then we don't." I took another step towards her. She returned her attention to the world outside, entirely nonchalant about the

confidently unarmed Brute approaching her.

The Spark breathed out a giant sigh. "I betrayed my Naven for love and my love betrayed me for The Core. I thought I couldn't live without him. But it's them I cannot live without. Perhaps Nyar will accept my soul as sacrifice in atonement." Before I could reach her, the slave girl closed her eyes and jumped, her weapon bouncing on the train's edge before following her out the door.

I didn't even hear her body break as it met the world below.

Nothing shocked me much anymore. So to feel that sensation return like an old friend surprising you with an unexpected visit—suffice it to say the ripeness of the emotion was not one I welcomed.

"She did you a favour."

I crouched low and withdrew Etrina, turning her on the owner of the voice.

A man appeared out of the corner of the compartment, a sword in his hand. I didn't have to look to know blood coated the blade. Behind him, lying face down on the floor, their shirt crimson was a body lacking a pulse.

The man kept his weapon in his hand as we began to circle the space, behind him an identical door to the one I had crawled through.

Tall and lanky, the man looked barely capable of lifting that sword over his head, let alone being capable of crossing the distance before I ran him through with Etrina.

I scented nothing negative from the man, no desire to harm me. But it meant nothing in the scale of things.

*"Always shield against an unknown opponent,"* Papa's voice said. *"A Spindle could just as well strangle you with your own shirt than a Brute tear out your throat."*

"Congratulations on passing registration."

The woman on the speaker startled him, causing him to drop his sword, a resounding clash of metal on metal filling the space. His eyes widened when he realised he'd allowed his shock to disarm him. I relaxed my stance, letting Etrina drop to my side. If he made no move to attack, I would not harm him.

"Please take your citizen ID," that woman announced in a sing-song voice.

A panel in the floor opened and something mechanical rose out of the floor. A round circular platform, and atop it, as if it were a display stand for a trophy or work of art, sat two metallic rings.

The man approached it, curious. I was more hesitant, for I recognised the items.

Collars, identical to the ones I had seen on the slave women in the camp.

"I'm not putting that on," I shouted up at the voice, not keen to add a second scar to my neck. "You hear me. I do not consent to being a slave."

"Slave?" The man looked positively confused.

The voice returned. "Consent is not required. Please take your citizen ID or you will be forced to disembark the train."

"Forced. She doesn't mean..."

I looked at the man, at his drenched and bruised state. His knuckles were white from squeezing the edge of the pillar so tightly, the skin scratched and bleeding. "You went through what I did, what do you think forced means?"

"Please take your citizen ID," the voice repeated cheerily.

I hated myself for doing it, for taking the cold silver metal ring in my hand. If I could have done anything else I would have, but I wasn't going to jump from the train to escape, and I wasn't inclined to find out how they forced one from the train either.

It was the lesser of two evils.

"What do we do with it?" In response to the man's question, the voice replied, "ID's are worn around the neck. Please comply."

Lines of iridescent silver circled the collar in geometric patterns, as though something else was merged into the material. But all I smelled was iron and traces of copper. There was no seal, no hinge to open it and get it around my neck.

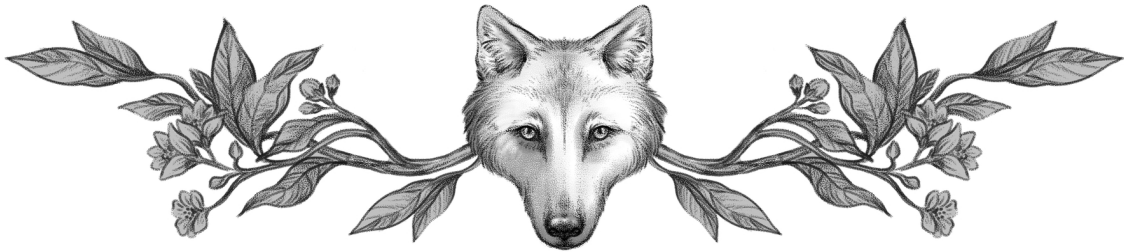
The man, his scent as young as my own, attempted to pry the metal apart with his hands, regardless of the fact it bore no seam.

When that failed, he chose to touch it to his neck.

The effect was instant. A river of molten silver, the metal liquified, crawled away from his hand and around his neck where it reforged itself into a solid state.

I'd never seen nanotech before. Deos refused to acknowledge the achievements of the apostates Prean Progressivism worshipped, but I was certain that was what I'd just witnessed.

Regret and I had bid farewell long ago, allowing it to return would not be in my favour, and my choices were limited to but one. With Etrina secured back in her sheath, I touched the collar to my neck and felt it come alive.



## RIEKA

The warmth was a surprise. Unless in proximity to a fire or baking in the sun, iron tended to be cold. Where the collar touched my neck, it was hard not to image hands resting there, warm and smooth, devoid of edges. How long must a person be forced to wear one before their skin starts to blister?

*Definitely longer than it took Etrina to give you the first one.*

"Kensillan Territory Rail approaching. Please disembark."

A low whistle sounded beyond the open doorway like a bat being swung through the air. It was the only warning we received before we were cut off from the fast-moving world outside.

Another train was pulling up alongside us, the wind wheezing between the carriages as though pressed between a vice. The train beyond was nothing but a wall of black until the wind's wheezing eased and the black solidified and hardened to reveal a large door.

If it wasn't for the vibrations beneath my feet, even I could have mistaken the two trains for being stationary.

The door slid open on the other side, flooding our compartment with warm light. A crowd of people were gathered, collars much like our own circling their necks. The one who had pulled the door open, a burly gentleman with a full head of dark curls, stepped over the

threshold between the two trains, one foot in each. Like a carnival performer on a balance beam.

"Best you two come aboard now. They don't give us long to fetch all the newcomers," the stranger said, addressing us in Pread.

The man offered his hand. A gesture of trust.

Nothing untoward came from the man, no scent of deceit or animosity, so I took his hand and approached the doorway. In the gap, like the smearing of paint, rock and dirt blurred beneath me. The only sign of the train's high-speed travel.

Crossing the boundary onto this train felt like walking into the market district of the capital. Blessed everywhere. The air was saturated in their scents. Natural and emotional, with every breath I took them in. Their curiosity, their anxiety, their caution. Nearly every blessing I knew to exist was present in someone in this space.

An entire carriage just to collect us? I doubted it. I couldn't see much, a thick crowd congregated in the space leaving little room for a stroll. The people were, well—stew. A bit of this and a bit of that. Whilst it was impossible to ascertain anyone's origin just by their features, it certainly wasn't common to wear silk embroidered Deogn Robes over that harsh cotton of Lycoan trousers, or to see a Setrali Naval uniform torn in half and restitched to a Torvian sailor's wet coat. And yet they were. As if the gods took the world in their hands and shook it just to see how it reformed when they stopped.

I shifted on the bench, wiggling my toes to gather the warmth that had been stolen by the water tank. The floor beneath my boots was hardwood, scuff marks scarring the surface. They were everywhere in fact. Every time someone moved in the space I saw more marks. A sign of frequent and forceful use. As foreboding a trait as everything else.

A grey figure passed in front of me and grunted as they took up a seat beside me.

"There were eight people in my first carriage, what about yours?" my death train companion asked, sniffing as he wrapped his blanket tighter around his body. He had a long face, thin lips and big brown eyes, the kind that showed signs of smiling more often than most.

"Eight."



He huffed out a breath at my response, then turned to me and offered me his hand, introducing himself. "I'm Bennic."

I shook his hand. "Rieka."

"Incoming!" someone shouted.

The doorway we'd entered through had been closed during my survey of the room. The man who pulled us aboard was opening it once again, revealing two young women staring wide-eyed across the gap. One sporting frizzy red hair, the other a Terrestrial Brute whose antlers appeared to be broken. Both were covered in blood. Both wearing collars.

Fear clung to them like oil.

They joined us in silence on the bench.

The door closed again a few more times until we were joined by three more pairs, five men and another woman. Ten.

Ten survivors out of eighty. And that was only an estimate based on the sixteen that had been split between mine and Bennic's carriages.

Old Rieka might have found that impossible. Deaths in that number could never occur under the golden eyes of the gods. Present-day Rieka knew better.

"They're all yours, Sal." The burly man tapped a young woman on the shoulder sitting on a bench on the opposing wall by the door. She rose to her feet.

She was in her early twenties maybe. She had a slight build, black hair cropped short at the shoulders, the shade blanching her fair complexion. And quite surprisingly, she wasn't wearing a collar.

Sal, as the burly man had called her, addressed us in Preat too. "If you'll follow me into *MedCom*, I'll see to your injuries."

We followed the petite woman through a doorway and down a flight of stairs. When all ten of us had gathered she pressed a button on the wall and the door slid open, a mechanical whirring accompanying it.

The scent of antiseptic, linen, and steel greeted us.

"Each of you take one of the cots, I can examine you one by one and then you can be on your way to the Mess Hall, I'm sure you're all hungry after that ordeal."

*MedCom* was a medical facility, a clinic perhaps. Both sides were lined with metal framed beds, cordoned off by privacy drapes, and on the other end of the carriage was a set of large open doors where a crowd had formed.

From the cot I'd been ushered to, I watched this Sal, their medic by my assumption, move from person to person, opening and closing the privacy drapes as she tended to the one behind it. More to block the stares of the voyeurs by the doors than for our benefit.

As she approached my cot, one of the two women who accompanied her pulled the drapes closed around us, the metal screeching as it passed along the overhead rail. Both women, unlike the medic, wore collars.

"Name please?" the medic asked without looking me in the eye.

"Rieka."

"No last name?" she asked.

"None that matters." One of the women reached out for my coat. The growl was instinctual. The fact the woman simply lowered her hand, unfazed by my reaction told me she'd experienced it enough to be unaffected by it.

"They are Spindles," the medic said. "They are going to mark your possessions for you, so that none may claim them as their own."

I'd encountered Spindles before. Mother had taken me to one of the fashion houses the Devoted frequented because I needed a gown for an upcoming Ascension Festival. The Spindles there were draped in the most exquisite silks, the material flowing off them in sentient waves. They had weaved the dress onto my body, right there in the dressing room.

These two women looked no different to a human seamstress. Those I'd been to many times. Spindle garments were expensive in the Deogn capital.

The second Spindle presented me with a piece of parchment, half a dozen black scribbles lined the paper, inviting me to pick one. I pointed to one randomly after which the other woman asked for my coat, assuring me they would return it. They then asked for everything else. My shawl, trousers, and boots. At least they'd permitted me to retain my slip and gloves.

The moment I returned to sitting on the cot, Sal closed the short distance between us, her head tilting to the side, her eyes on a spot over my shoulder, the look in them distant, almost as if...

*She's blind.*

Her hands hovered over my body, first by my shoulders then my hip and knees. But she never touched me. Sal wasn't just the medic. She was an Organic. Only a human medic was required to make physical contact with a patient to mend them. A skilled Organic needed only proximity and clarity of mind.

Or so I'd read.

She dropped her hands. "Nothing's broken. I've mended the bruising around your ribs. There was a nasty hematoma forming there. Aside from the graze on your chin, you survived remarkably unscathed."

I brushed off the casual way she spoke of that death train and touched my chin, wincing at the sting when my fingers brushed over the raised flesh. It must have happened when I smacked it into the luggage rack.

"Take this." She pulled a small tub from her pocket and held it out for me to take, the seal made it impossible for me to determine its contents. "Apply the salve twice a day for a week. It should be healed by then."

I'd never heard of an Organic treating someone this way. Mending only one injury and not the other when it would be easier to do both.

When I didn't take the tub, Sal placed it on the cot beside me. "It is good for the body to be allowed to heal things on its own. Further intervention was not necessary. If you would like me to remove the scar later, you can return to *MedCom*. But if you use the ointment, there should be no need to return. You will not scar if you use it as I've instructed." She paused and then added, "It should also help with the rope burn."

My hand instinctively went to my neck, to the raised line where the noose had been.

Sal didn't pry any further, but she did add that once the collar began to chafe I could use the ointment on that too.

Her companions chose that moment to return my clothes. One of them lifted my shawl, the fabric spread out over her hand. The mark I had picked was embroidered on the material in a thin white thread, an odd angular swirl with two dots. The second woman asked to touch my slip. I gave her my permission and she stepped forward to place her hand on the fabric between my shoulder blades. A sensation not dissimilar to a beetle crawling across skin occupied the space where she pressed. She withdrew and proceeded to ask for my hands.

As she cupped them in her own, I noticed the roll of white twine wrapped around her wrist like a bangle. Her hand hovered over my glove, then as she lowered it, the bangle began to spin. A white tendril twisted around her hand and snuck between her palm and the buckskin glove where the tickling sensation returned. She did the same for my other hand. When she stepped away, I found the mark embroidered in the hide of the gloves.

"Your mark will be registered with the council," Sal informed me as I reached back and felt the silk between my fingertips, recognising the same pattern stitched there too. It was on everything I possessed, and that wasn't much. Everything else I owned was in a pack somewhere in the Kensillan woods, still strapped to Engar's horse.

A feeling began to surface when the women left. The sensation of walking out a door and finding the world beyond was upside down, and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't flip with it. I sat, fidgeting with the fastening on my gloves.

After the ten of us had been attended to, some in a little worse shape than others, the same curly-haired, burly gentleman from earlier, who finally introduced himself as Tomas invited us to eat.

We followed him through a set of doors connecting *MedCom* to one that looked an awful lot like a gambling house. The stench of alcohol and pipeweed perfumed the air as passengers stared at our group from darkened leather seated alcoves under yellow-tinted Bright-light.

My senses told me we were heading in the direction of the front of the train. Tomas didn't stop as we passed through another carriage.

This one bore a timber corridor that engulfed us in the aroma of a multitude of Blessed, some of which stood in the string of doorways that lined it. Their faces curiously examined us as our party walked through. I only managed to glance through one doorway and found the space beyond inhabited by more than a dozen Blessed passengers, many of which were akin to dens. There were three more carriages identical to this one. *Group Sleepers*, Tomas called them when someone asked.

Upon reaching the end of the fourth *Group Sleeper*, he led us up another stairwell, across the train passage and through a carriage he called *The Gardens*.

It was less garden and more indoor forest. There was a grove of trees growing in rows down the centre of the carriage stretching up to an enormous skylight. Scattered between them were fruit trees. I smelled at least a dozen species as we walked past groups of passengers picking the fruits from the branches. After everything that had happened in the last day, I still found myself wondering just how something like this was possible.

The walls crawled with climbing plants, whittled wicker frames allowing for expanded but controlled growth. Baskets too intricately weaved to be made by human hands hung from the ceiling at various lengths, creating an array of green and yellow fireworks.

If it wasn't for Tomas leading us through the grove, I would likely have gotten lost in here. We passed by a circular fountain in the centre of the grove, which I assumed once flowed with water, but was now dry and housed large quantities of cultivated wildflowers. Some I recognised from my travels, others I didn't.

Around the fountain was a ring of benches occupied by passengers quietly conversing amongst themselves. All but one was vacant. It housed a golden statue instead. The visage of a woman reading.

As soon as we passed through the next passageway, I knew we had arrived at our destination. Tomas called it *The Mess Hall* — a long open compartment with high ceilings, dozens of windows lining each side and wide enough for three long dining tables to stretch the length, each one crowded with passengers.

Meals were served at the seventh, twelfth and eighteenth hours of the day Tomas told us, and as it was the latter, we were encouraged to get dinner now before the other *residents* arrived. No one questioned the information. We did as instructed, heading over to a line by the door where other passengers were. A collared passenger dished out the meals on a large assortment of mismatched crockery, served from a trolley with a half-dozen hot pots.

My stomach grumbled when I caught the scent of stewed game.

We all took our bowls in silence and as though some odd comradery had formed, all took seats in a space at the same table.

"Do you think it is poisoned?" the redhead said in Preat, her accent lilting on the vowels in a familiar way.

My senses picked up every ingredient used in the meal. From the deer and the vegetables to the sugar they'd used to slightly sweeten the dish. If there was poison in the stew, there would be two hundred convulsing bodies in the room. Tomas was clearly enjoying the bowl he'd been served from the same pot as our own, and unless they killed their newcomers, I doubted it had been tampered with. Drake venom—a tasteless and odourless poison—was the most likely candidate should one of us suddenly drop dead.

And the only Drake among us was chowing into his plate with ravenous delight, slurping unapologetically. Young, perhaps mid-twenties, with ochre skin that glistened under the warm lights of the carriage and a lean muscular build only discernible due to his garments, an extensively embroidered vest with no undershirt. He wiped away the traces of his meal from his lips with the back of his hand as he is green serpentine eyes, visible beneath the dark waves of his fringe, looked around eagerly. "Do you think they serve seconds?"

His accent was identical to the redhead, confirming my suspicions. Torvians. They were coastal people, building cities on water and sailing in their sky ships, rarely venturing further north than The Imperial City. I'd only recognised the accent because it had the same lilting quality as the Torvian operas I listened to repeatedly when I lived in the Citadel.

He waited for an answer that didn't come. One of the others, the woman who'd arrived last, changed the topic to a far more engaging one.

"Where do you think we are?"

No one seemed to acknowledge her words, perhaps too scared to voice their fears. None but an elder gentleman with greying hair. "Judging the design, I'd say we were on a Monarchical Era Locomotive. Pre-republic. The Kensillan Monarchy used to have several they used to tour the nation with."

"We're on a five-hundred-year-old train?" the woman said in disbelief.

"Oh yes, quite feasible," the man continued quite nonchalantly as if he were giving a history lecture. "Kensillans were very ahead of their time. Some say they were ahead of even the Preans in their use of Devo ingenuity."

The woman shifted in her seat, leaning into the table as she changed the topic. "Well then old man, how do you propose we get off this locomotive?"

Several eyes shot up at once, faces plastered with keen interest, scents eager as they looked to one another for a suggestion or an answer.

"Unless you want to learn what that collar on your neck is really for. I'd suggest not even contemplating running away." Tomas glanced up from his plate, a gaze that felt much older than he looked surveying us.

Another one of the men, this one wearing tattered Deogn Robes, the seams torn open at his shoulders, spoke in broken Prean. "We are prisoners, yes?"

Tomas looked back to his half-eaten bowl of stew, his motions slow, as if he was intentionally taking his time to eat. "Yes."

No one said another word.

The jovial mood of the rest of the passengers of the train unsettled my companions. The residents, as Tomas had called them, spoke with one another in a combination of words and hand gestures, whilst some said nothing at all. Entire conversations were

conducted in utter silence, with the occasional burst of laughter or the clap of a hand cutting through that void.

I knew most languages in Idica. Boredom was commonplace in my former vocation and reading became a solace, so when I was permitted to take a book from the Celestial Library it was rarely in Deogn, my native tongue. From whatever book I could find written in the language, I'd taught myself Preat and Old Preat since it was the trade language of the Preat Union. The member nations were harder to come by. My only source of education for them was Audibles, aural recordings the library kept in the archives. So, after a year with nothing to do in my free time but read, I'd developed a good ear. What the passengers spoke here, the majority at least, was not one I knew. I recognised a few words in Old Kenar—the archaic tongue of Kensilla before it became a republic and closed its borders to the world—along with some Preat and Deogn words that were interspersed amongst quick short sentences that incorporated those hand gestures.

But I had never encountered or read about a language like this before. It was as intriguing as it was unsettling.

Tomas suddenly stood and my companions bolted to their feet.

Our guide straightened his vest, the material aged and worn, and instructed us to return our plates to a trolley at one end of the carriage, for those in *The Kitchen* to tend to.

No one spoke as we followed him down another stairwell. Travelling towards the back of the train, we crossed through the compartment directly beneath *The Gardens* where it appeared passengers were growing food crops. Various root vegetables, greens and herbs were being cultivated in raised beds under Bright-lights and heaters. The language was spoken here too.

We crossed back through *MedCom*, the majority of the cots now unoccupied, and into the largest carriage I had ever seen. It smelled distinctly of soap, linen, and sweat. Tomas led us hastily around the edge of a giant in-ground pool, the passengers here void of any shame as they conversed in various states of nudity in that very same language. Those gestures were much more obvious in this space.



We passed two women sitting together on a wooden bench by the wall, both naked and neither one saying a single word as their hands moved. They appeared to comprehend what the other was saying.

I felt my stomach twist.

Languages are formed over long periods of time, words adopted and reformed to accommodate the culture that spoke it. The Celestial Library boasted the most comprehensive collection of books on the continent, and if they had no record of this language then in all likelihood it had developed here. In isolation.

Tomas' words suddenly felt heavier.

We finally came to a stop in a carriage that smelled very much like a den. Large square cavities lined the walls in vertical pairs, each one large enough to accommodate a bed fit for two.

The space seemed to be able to accommodate over fifty people, with quite a few who were in various stages of undress. A ladder ran up the wall between each pair, and an alcove with a long window was in between every other. Here is where Tomas chose to speak.

"Welcome to the Kensillan Territory Rail. You are now wards of the Republic of Kensilla and the Venerable Council. You have been granted a stay of execution for the crime of being born with a taint."

He paused to let his words sink in, to let us understand his meaning. The train was a prison. For Blessed.

"The Rail is now your home. The collar around your neck is both your ticket and your shackle. Best acclimatise yourself. Should you attempt to leave, no one will stop you. But the attempt will kill you. Attempt to leave the train whilst it is moving, and you will die. Attempt to take off the collar or tamper with it and you will die. If anyone on board says they can take it off for you, they are lying. And if anyone even suggests you can escape to Lantern Town, they are most definitely trying to get you killed. The collars cannot be removed."

"Who *can* remove them?" Bennic asked. He'd been quietly observing this place alongside me since we left the dining carriage.

Tomas smiled. "Know any gods?" It was said in humour. But unfortunately, it hadn't been taken as such. Tomas cleared his throat. "Eight of you can sleep in this carriage." He pointed to four

empty bunks, one of those window alcoves between them. "The other two come with me."

He waited for us to decide. The woman who had asked if we could escape and the man who she'd survived the death train with stepped forward and left with Tomas.

I was the first to move into the alcove to claim a bunk, choosing the lowest one closest to the exit. There were sliding partitions for each bunk facing the alcove. I pulled it open and sat on the bed.

The little female Terrestrial, still partially in her metamorphic state, looked to the bunk opposite, tugging on the redhead's hand. She'd clung to her since the medical carriage. As she turned, I was able to better gauge the damage she'd taken to her antlers. I quickly had to snuff the anger that roiled under my skin.

They hadn't been broken off as I'd initially thought. They had been cut off, right down to the root. Still resembling that of a deer, the young woman shuffled her hooves on the metal floor nervously. Whoever had taken her antlers had done it intentionally. The trauma of removing them, much like the violence inflicted on the Rabbit-Blessed Terrestrial from the camp, had caused intentional damage. She would be stuck in her metamorphic state until they grew back.

The moment she caught my eye, her tail which had been elevated a moment ago flattened itself against her, sensing danger from my presence.

That was the behaviour I was accustomed to before I'd met Kris. The redhead accommodating the gentle tugging took the bunk opposite, positioning herself on the edge of the bunk, between us and the Terrestrial. She couldn't have been older than me, her dark complexion such a pleasing contrast to the brightness of her red hair. And the freckles that scattered her cheeks and hands had the oddest effect of making it appear as though her skin shimmered. *Her metamorphic state must be a sight to behold.* I picked up the slightest traces of salt water, and her hands looked quite rough, I wouldn't be surprised if her occupation before all this was manual labour—somewhere near the coast.

"Who here speaks Prean?" asked the elderly greying gentleman from earlier. He was much younger than I'd initially thought. Perhaps

in his middle years, with a dark complexion, honey-coloured eyes and a greying beard to accompany his hair. The state of his robes, the blackened and charred ends, confirmed what my senses detected—he was a Kindling.

Myself and Bennic, both the women and the serpent-eyed Drake, raised a hand.

The man in the tattered clothes answered once again in broken Prean. “Only few words.”

Tattered was not a state I’d ever seen Deogn silks in. It was as though someone had dragged them through mud, scraped them over rocks and baked them in the sun. Only two classes of citizens in Deos could afford such expensive attire. Devoted, those who were seen by society as being worthy of attending Citadel in the presence of the Celestials, and the Artisans, those who benefitted from the gods' favour through their artistic expression. Right now, he looked like neither—and rather malnourished.

“You are Deogn?” the older man asked him. The Deogn nodded in acknowledgement, expression stoic as he glanced from face to face and then stopped when he reached mine.

***“I know you,”*** his inner voice declared.

I glanced at the man as normally as I could knowing if I looked away too soon, I might draw suspicion. But it didn’t stop me from pulling the hem of my glove up my wrist.

“And you, sir, can you understand me?” the older man asked as he addressed the youngest of his sex, a handsome man with short cropped ink black hair who wore a singlet that revealed muscular arms covered in very brightly coloured tattoos. A short, and rather pretty phrase passed his lips on his way up the ladder to the bunk above the women’s bed. My education in Pazgari was rudimentary at best, but I knew what that phrase meant.

“Fuck this.”

As he climbed, I noticed two long slits in the back of his singlet.

The southern island of the continent was considered to have the most dialects of any nation in Idica, and that wasn’t including those just in the seven sovereign cities. I’d read that even the native Pazgari had trouble understanding one another. What audibles I’d

heard made me think he was from the east coast of the island. Shadowport maybe.

"Quite an eclectic group we have. Perhaps names might help," the older man added.

"Why bother old man?" said the Pazgari in a cold angry tone in Prean. "They will probably come up with a different way to kill us tomorrow. You're wasting your breath." The old man brushed off the comment. Clearing his throat, he introduced himself. "I am Hentirion Ignati." He then translated for the Deogn, whose name was one I recognised immediately.

"Emil Kal."

Leaning her elbows on her knees, the redheaded Torvian introduced herself next. "S'vara Xaiaren."

"And you, my dear?" he asked the shy Terrestrial who had pushed herself across her bed until her back was against the wall of the bunk, her fur-covered knees under her chin.

"Tir'tana. But Tira is what the commune called me." Excitement shot from Hentirion like an arrow, the scent conflicting in this fear-induced environment. "Commune! You come from the Enibon Islands?"

They were the dozens of little islands off the coast of Torvar. Tira was a Terrestrial. It made sense. They'd inhabited those islands for generations.

"Not anymore," she said solemnly. "The slavers' ships came to the island and rounded up everyone, even the younglings. Then they set us free only to chase us down." It didn't take much to determine what she meant by chase. It solved the question of her damaged antlers.

"Farox Benhairo," said the Drake, then Bennic and then I introduced ourselves, my voice garnering a spike in fear from Tira.

Hentirion looked to the bunk where our angry Pazgari companion lay. "And you, young man, what shall we call you?"

The young man provided Hentirion with a nonchalant response. "Saska."

Hentirion smiled softly. "There we go. Now that we are all acquainted perhaps tomorrow might not be as daunting. Would

everyone like to go to the seventh-hour meal together, greater strength in numbers perhaps?"

Most agreed, but I didn't care. I honestly didn't care about much right now. I wanted a bath; I wanted a drink, and I wanted to cry.

"Then shall we call it a night?" He turned his attention back to Saska. "Perhaps Farox could share your bunk Saska, and Bennic can squeeze up here with me and Emil."

Hentirion's suggestion wasn't without its merits. The beds were large. They had enough headroom to sit up and not bump your head and were large enough to fit a third person. Though I doubted very much it would be comfortable, regardless of Hentirion's good intentions.

"No, it's fine. Bennic can sleep beside me." I shifted so he could climb into the bunk.

"My back thanks you. But I'll have to make my way back through the train. I think I left something back in the dining hall." He gave me a small smile, as he looked across the room, possibly trying to figure out which exit led to *The Mess*.

"Want company?" I didn't want to go, but being kind under the circumstances seemed appropriate. Bennic declined the offer. "I'll be right back when I find it."

I tried to get comfortable in the bunk after he left, but found I could not sleep. There were too many thoughts flittering through my head. About Kris, about Taren. *Tiny*. I tried reciting recipes to myself in the hopes I would just drift off. I didn't, so I counted heartbeats. I counted those in this carriage, and then since the doors between the sleepers were open, I counted the heartbeats in those too.

I was still awake when Bennic finally returned an hour later, the light snores of Hentirion and Farox helping me keep time. He appeared happy, a smile on his face. "You found what you were after I presume?"

"Oh yes." He flipped a small black and gold button in his hand and placed it in his pocket. A keepsake of some kind. Considering how small it was, I was surprised he found it in a room that large.

I moved my hand to rest over the place where Tiny's fur was concealed in the pipe pouch, hoping proximity to him would help me

sleep in a strange place as he had so many times before. But I still couldn't sleep.

I'd seen a washroom in the corner of the carriage. Perhaps cleaning up a little might help slow my mind. I pulled myself from the bunk, careful not to bump Bennic awake. He'd fallen asleep almost the instant his head had touched the pillow.

There was no door to the washroom, so I shouldn't expect any semblance of privacy, but there was a mirror. My appearance was as bad as I expected.

I looked like a wet long-haired snow rat.

My hair was matted, and the braid didn't even look like one anymore. The water had washed away most of the slavers' blood from my face, but I could still find traces of it around my ears, my hairline, and under my fingernails.

A snow rat that someone had taken a club to.

The graze on my chin wasn't too bad at least.

I untied my shawl and pulled off my coat. I tried to clean the spot off with the water from the sink but there were just too many, and I couldn't even find soap. Kris would be so pissed at the state of it.

At least my buckskin vest was untouched. The same couldn't be said for my shirt. One of the sleeves was stained. And it had the smelled like the weasel. It wouldn't come out either. I didn't even bother with the spots on my boots.

There were folded cloths beneath the sink so I took one and used it to clean the blood from my face and ears, then faltered when the stroke down my neck was hindered.

Gods, the collar looked so inconspicuous, as if it were a necklace that could be removed. So I tried to. I was in a confined enough space that if it backfired, the only one hurt would be me. But when I searched my mind for a spell to remove the collar, nothing came. As if there wasn't one.

I took one last hateful glare at the collar then returned to my cleaning, wiping away the blood caked beneath it, then across my scar and down my chest.

The light caught my eyes. I shifted again, causing the grey to flicker to white, the colour which had no doubt caught the slavers off

guard when I had ripped them all to pieces.

My breath came out in a stutter, my vision began to blur. I quickly wiped a hand across my eyes and returned to my hair. I used my fingers since I had no comb. But after several minutes of trying and failing to detangle the wet knots, an exhausted dry sob escaped from my traitorous mouth.

"You can use mine." The voice came from the little girl in the mirror's reflection, a comb outstretched in her hand, her eyes downcast. She was Wolf-Blessed like me, but unlike my blessing, which seemed defective when it came to manifesting, her tail and ears were on full display. She couldn't have been more than nine.

I slowly turned, registering fear from the young girl. I took a step towards her, taking note of the submissive way in which she was greeting me. "Is that allowed?"

"As long as you give it back to me." She took a single step forward, continuing to hold out the comb. There were so many ways this could go wrong. A pup making first contact with an older Wolf-Blessed, an Apex Brute. She was endangering herself. I'd met other Brutes, members of the Celestial Guard who took slight when young ones crossed the boundary of familiarity. Many a recruit returned home with fresh claw marks. It was why I hadn't said a word to S'vara yet, she too was Wolf-Blessed.

Yet, I was not in the world I knew. So I did the only appropriate thing. I crouched down and offered her my cheek. She took the invitation and padded quickly over to me, her bushy brown hair tickling my nose as she brushed her cheek to mine. She then lingered, allowing me to scent her.

I let her do the same. She offered the comb once again and as reached for it, I noticed a black mark on her hand. A pattern not dissimilar to the ones I'd seen the Spindles put on my clothes.

She stepped away, only moving back to the doorway when I had taken it. I sighed with relief when the knots obliged.

"You smell like a wolf," she finally said, her head cocking to the side. "But you also don't smell like a wolf."

"Is that so?" I handed her back the comb, and she replied, "You can borrow it again until you get your own." With the knots finally

gone I proceeded to braid a crown atop my head.

"Are you one of those people who live in the land of snow? Teacher said they have white wolves there." A quick glance at my hair hinted to the origin of her question.

"The Hetra?"

The small she-wolf nodded, her eyes focused intensely on me.

"I've come from there, yes." She didn't say anything else as I finished the crown, unable to plait the rest without a tie to secure it. I bent down until we were face-to-face. "What's your name, pup?"

"Ghena."

"It is nice to meet you, Ghena. My name is Rieka." She repeated my name to herself

"Ghena, can I ask you a question?" I added before she had a chance to leave. She nodded. "Why is it that you don't have a collar when my friends and I do?"

"Because I'm invisible. The Eyes can't see me without it."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

Anger. Thick and heady.

Fury that tasted like a thunderstorm.

I rushed towards Ghena, pushing her into the washroom behind me. Standing in the alcove where my companions slept was a figure, the window casting a dark halo around them. They stood gazing down at my bunk. At Bennic.

As if by some invisible force, Bennic was ripped from the bunk and held aloft, his feet dangling off the ground, his face directly in front of the strangers'. The air in the room stilled for a moment, then began to move towards the stranger. Towards Bennic. Strangled gasping noises sounded from his throat as the air in the room pushed against his flesh. Panicked hands reached blindly for the source but found nothing but the air. The heartbeat of the stranger spiked and the air shifted again violently.

Bennic's hands were instantly crushed, bones protruding, skin splitting.

Growls and howls erupted in the room at his blood being spilled. A scream shot from the bunk opposite, from Tira who was being



shielded by a very awake and growling S'vara, red wolf ears and fangs now donning her dark sun-kissed features.

The air shifted again, much more slowly as if it had a mind of its own. And I watched, half in fascination and half repulsion as Bennic's chest began to concave, like he was a slab of meat on Engar's butcher's table.

Pneumatics could control the air. They could call on the wind to sail a ship, induce flight, even hear far off into the distance, and they could also use it as a weapon, their arsenal the very world itself. The stranger was a Pneumatic.

The scent of pain and fear made the room sing with delirium, my own sense of clarity muddled by the sight of Bennic's blood dripping onto the floor in several crimson pools where his ribs had pierced his chest. The stranger released his hold on Bennic, and his body fell to the floor in a wet heap.

Bennic coughed up blood as the figure stood over him, glowering. Emil, who had jumped down from his bunk was being held back by Hentirion, the older man noticing the same thing I had. None of the other residents of the room were doing anything, they were just watching the event unfold.

Bennic's heart stopped.

The collar on his neck came alive and dissolved, running from his neck like the molten steel in a blacksmith's forge. It pooled by his head before reforming into the very same solid metal collar he'd put on only hours ago.

The figure then stared down at the collar. The light from the window touched his face, illuminating his features. Short auburn hair, a strong nose, a ginger beard and his neck bare of any collar.

He leaned down, picked up Bennic's collar, and then left the carriage.

Ghena was called away a moment later by someone I could only assume was her mother, leaving me standing in the doorway, my companions motionless by the bunks.

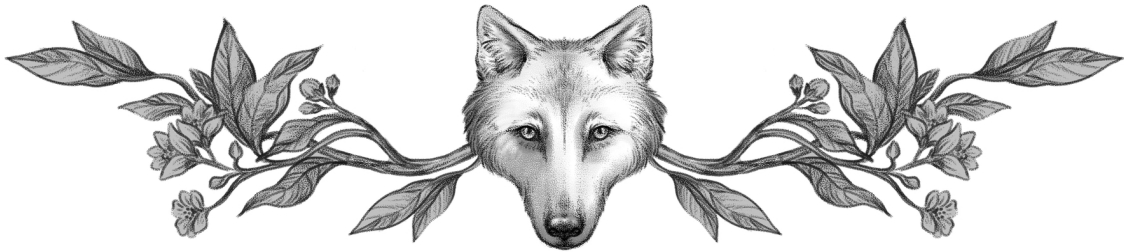
We were in a state of shock. Except Saska. He let off a single laugh before returning to lying back down. No one said anything but his words from earlier were no doubt replaying in all our minds.

A group of passengers arrived ten minutes later with buckets of soapy water and a bag big enough to fit a body in. Bennic's body. They removed him and cleaned the floor of any traces of his blood, and then left without a word to any of us.

When I'd finally regained enough semblance of control over my body, refusing to leave the washroom until my heart rate had returned to a normal rhythm, I returned to the bunk. The warmth of Bennic's body still lingered on the mattress. As I rolled over, refusing to turn my back on the carriage, I noticed the small black button wedged on the mantle that ran the circumference of the little pod I now inhabited alone. There was a pair of cupboards in the wall of the pod. I picked one for myself and put his keepsake inside it.

Saska seemed to be the only one who slept that night.

When the seventh hour came, no one chose to rise for breakfast.



## RIEKA

*The sun kissed my face, the warmth as gentle a caress as my lovers. His fingers trailed down my arm, tickling the skin at the dip in my elbow. Soft lips touched my neck and my fist in the grass groped for a firmer hold as his tongue teased in ecstasy.*

*His hand gripped my chin and I turned into him, my body moulding into his, made for his.*

*Sunlit eyes gazed into mine in desperation, a craving for what only we could give one another. A strand of amber had fallen across his brow. I raised my hand to move it, to touch him and make his body ignite for me as mine did for him.*

*His hand moved from my chin, trailing down the skin of my arm, the sensation torturous, like desperate whispers spoken but the words unheard. His hand slowed at my hip, his caress firm when he reached my ass. Then in one swift move, he gripped my leg and moved it, raising it over him, hooking me upon his body. He slid my dress up, his hand moving deliciously lower, my skin sensitive to his very touch as his fingers found their target, the contact forcing me to bite my lower lip in anticipation.*

*He teased me. One finger moving in achingly slow motions. I kept my eyes open, relishing in the expression he bore. Excited and wild.*

*I stifled a moan, biting my lip as the power his hand held built within me, a well slowly filling.*

*"Say you love me," he whispered in my ear, his voice low.*

*"I love you," I said breathlessly. He hastened the collapse of my resolve, his fingers unrelenting in their fervour. I sucked in a breath at the sudden surge building within me.*

*"Say you're mine."*

*"I'm yours."*

*He kissed me, my words absorbed by his lips, consuming them into himself.*

*The well inside me threatened to overflow, his hand having finally reached my soul and pulled until all I could feel were his lips on mine and the tether between us pulled taut, threatening to snap taking my sanity with it.*

*"Say my name."*

*"No," I whimpered back, seeing the fire in his eyes aflame at my being so near to the climax he so hungrily wanted to see on my face.*

*"Say my name," he pleaded again.*

*"No." I smiled, relishing in retaining what little power I had left, forcing him to take me higher, to move his hand slower once again. I was not ready. It wasn't enough. I wanted more. I wouldn't say his name.*

*I heard a snap. A branch breaking. Anger. The smell of anger.*

*I sat up, alert.*

*A black wolf stood ten feet away in the long grass. Her fiery golden eyes locked on mine.*

*She took a step towards the picnic basket in the grass between us.*

*He called my name.*

*I twisted to face him.*

*His starlit eyes were wide. His mouth moved, my name on his tongue.*

*Blood poured.*

*Crimson.*

*My name, death on his lips.*



There were flashes of steely blue on the bunk wall, ridged tendrils of the moonlit world outside the curtained window, taunting me in this prison. The scent of sweat coated the room in a thick blanket of lust as couples fucked in their bunks, their moans the mumblings of insects in this field of steel burrows. Bright-lights hung from the ceiling as makeshift chandeliers, the motion of the train swaying them, causing shadows to play on the walls in darkened tales of dreams unfulfilled, dreams imprisoned beneath silver collars.

Tira's soft snores informed me I had not woken her when I startled awake from my dream, from the recurring nightmare that never changed. She shifted on her bunk, nuzzling her head into S'vara's shoulder like Tiny did to warm his nose in the night.

Like Tiny used to do.

He'd been gone a day, perhaps more and my head felt empty without him, my sight lonely without his spectrals.

I couldn't recall a day where I had been without him. And now there was one achingly long day.

From his position on the floor as night watch I found Emil staring at me, a ray of moonlight cast across his eyes like a blindfold, a ghostly echo of the one hanging between his pressed fingertips. He noticed my gaze upon it—his Pesai—the symbol of devotion to the ones I no longer served.

"I can't seem to be rid of it." Emil lifted the sheer blue eyeshield, the colour indicating his position as an Artisan, running it through his fingers. The sight of the item that my people used to emulate our masked gods made my stomach turn.

I said nothing in reply.

"I know they've abandoned me, but somehow, I can't part from it. As though it were a tether to them and I've no way to cut it." His

gaze returned. "How did you do it?"

It did not surprise me Emil knew I was a fellow countryman. My former vocation made it impossible for my face not to be recognised, at least by some. But perhaps his shame, the scent palpable in this confined space, had given him enough sense of propriety not to pry into why I was no longer employed in it.

And since I did not possess a pesai any longer, the eyeshield that if not upon my face, was expected to be visible on my person, he had assumed I had relieved myself of it.

My reply was as cold as it was honest.

"I burned it."



Three days.

Three days of living on this godsforsaken train.

Three since Bennic had been murdered. For his collar was the only explanation I'd managed to ascertain from our fellow passengers as they'd gossiped amongst themselves.

Three days since we learned the train never stopped and three days since I had eaten anything. I had slept on occasion, but only when one of the others was on watch. Emil had suggested it when Tira had refused to go to sleep after Bennic's murder. He and Farox had first night watch, S'vara and I took the second night, whilst Hentirion had volunteered for the third. Saska had agreed simply because we refused to let Tira do it. She'd been too afraid to leave the bunk that first day, so none of us did either.

We'd spent it talking, an attempt to get to know one another since we appeared to not be capable of doing anything else. We spoke of where we came from, and how we came to be here. Tira's island was raided; Hentirion was kidnapped on the road on a research expedition for The Great Library where he was employed as a

scholar's assistant; Emil was banished and sold for breaking Deogn laws though he never said which one; and S'vara, who claimed to be a merchant woman from the largest port city in the Shadow Sea said, her ship was stolen and she was sold. Farox who seemed oddly amused by his own words had claimed to have pissed off the wrong guard at a bar who happened to be a Kensillan soldier who'd crossed the border secretly and cornered him in an alley with five others. Saska was the only one whose arrival details were kept short. Betrayal was the word he had used. The Pazgari didn't elaborate any further.

When it was my turn, I contemplated lying. But there was no point, too many details to make up and keep track of so I told them of my desire to work in a bakery in Prea, of choosing to venture there through The Hetra, of my employment with the inn, and how the day I was to leave, my friends were kidnapped by Kensillan slavers and I'd been captured in my attempt to save them.

"Brave," Farox had said, equating my actions with the folkloric shield maidens of Torvian myth. A tale his three younger sisters regularly requested. I called it naivety.

How else could I explain my situation? I thought myself smart enough to take on slave traffickers, and now I was stuck in a box. Why didn't they just kill us and be done with it?

We spoke well into the night, not one of us inclined to dwell on the memory of witnessing Bennic's death, and not quite prepared to tempt anyone else into taking our collar. The topic of the collarless passengers only broached once to see what our theories were. None were positive.

"*Trauma bonding*," my father called it. Guards stationed on the Mesali Coast would often return to the Capital Garrison, unable to form attachments with anyone other than the guards who fought alongside them against the Pirate Queen's armada. "*An emotional connection formed over a shared traumatic experience.*"

I honestly just didn't feel like getting out of bed. And if I had to continue talking to these strangers to achieve that, I would. Though the extent of what I shared of my life—well, only I knew what line of

honesty I was willing to cross. I never outright lied to them. I just omitted details.

Since none of us felt inclined to eat elsewhere, Hentirion had volunteered to see if he could bring the meals back to the bunks but he had returned empty-handed, regurgitating some rule about rat prevention in the sleepers. I'd found Engar's smoked meat still in my coat that first morning, so I shared it with them over the next few days.

During my watch the second night, the real rat prevention system made itself known. Cats. Lots of stray cats that wandered about the train at night. A large tabby, female by her smell, meandered into the alcove of our bunks, and made herself comfortable on Tira's bed, causing S'vara to startle awake and volunteer early for our watch. She wasn't fond of cats it seemed.

I didn't sleep during her watch though. I couldn't. Ever since Tiny

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But my waking thoughts were no better. Images of Taren and his wings seemed to taint the nightly shadows, Kris and her smoke pipe, and the pouch it was likely I would now never get to give her. I promised Taren I would find and rescue him but how was that even possible now? I'd dug myself a deep grave and willingly crawled into it.

S'vara having detected I wasn't sleeping chose to amuse herself out loud with theories as to why we were aboard the train and not on land.

"Why do you think they threw us on the other train before this one?"

I had my theories. Sadism, perversion, entertainment, hate, sport. Each one was worse than the next, too unbearable to contemplate—because of hope. Because if Taren and Kris weren't here, then there was only one other possibility. I'd seen Taren shackled and thrown on another train. For all I knew he had been thrown on the death train before me, and since he wasn't here—The thought made tears well in my eyes and I rolled over in my bunk.

I kept my theories to myself because voicing them meant putting those thoughts out into the world. Tempting fate to prove me right.



And oh, how I wanted to be wrong.

S'vara took over the watch and sat the rest of the night on a blanket on the floor of the alcove, tying knots into a piece of rope she had around her waist.

This morning, the third day aboard the train, Saska announced he was going to breakfast. Insisting that if he was to go on watch tonight, he was going to do it on a full stomach. I'd volunteered to stay with Tira, however my efforts to remain in bed were crushed when she asked if she could join him.

"No offence Rieka," she said sweetly, finally able to meet my eyes. "But I'm a little tired of eating smoked meat."

With Tira leaving, and everyone else willing to accompany her, I no longer had an excuse to stay behind.

I distracted myself with their conversations on the walk to the mess. Somehow our group was carrying on two discussions at once. The first one led by Hentirion was regarding the fact the train had slowed down for a short period before sunrise and he and Emil were theorising why. The other was about Lantern Town, the village built into a cliff face we'd heard other passengers in our sleeper discussing late last night. A mountain village that the train visited for three days annually, a place the passengers were excited about. Which I found intriguing given our circumstances. Another sadistic game by our wardens no doubt.

We reached the Mess Hall during what looked like peak meal hour. All three of the long tables that stretched the length of the carriage were full. We were lucky enough to find a space on the far left table big enough to accommodate all seven of us, our arrival garnering remarks and looks from the passengers already seated. No one made an effort to converse with us, which was fine by me. We took turns going to the serving trolley in pairs. On the way back to the table, my mind enticed by the prospect of eating fried eggs and wondering how they even got the poultry onto the train if it never stopped, I caught the scent of fresh pine.

And damp soil.

Then I heard a laugh and frantically gazed around at the tables.

A flash of red caught my eye.

Sitting on the far-right table, conversing with a woman with hair the colour of mulled wine sat *the* Bloodhound.

"YOU!"

He looked across the room, his eyes locking on mine, and I saw red.

The red on my hands. The red beneath my nails. The red on the snow. The red on Tiny's fur.

The red of his coat.

I ran at him, plates shattering on the floor, breaking beneath my feet as I jumped over the table separating us and onto his, launching myself at him. We crashed into the floor, my body pinning him to the ground, my hands gripping the leather of his coat as I tried to contain my fury.

"Well hello there darlin'," Rhydian said, his tone annoyingly calm and smooth. It made my blood boil.

"*WHERE IS KRIS?!*"

A single brow raised.

**"Far from here."**

The edge of my vision began to darken, my grip slackening on his jacket.

"Someone get her off him!" a husky female voice demanded.

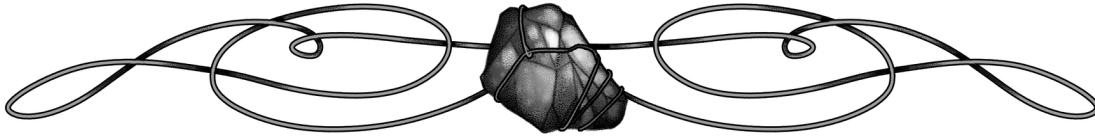
"No she's fine, Eleen," he said, a cocky self-assured smile emerging on his face.

"You know her, Rhydian?" Confusion was evident in the brunette's voice. My knees suddenly gave out, the muscles finally failing me after days without sleep. I fell, crashing into his chest.

"She's my wife."

A muffled sort of laugh escaped me at his words. "*We fucked one time and suddenly I'm your wife! A Bloodhound and a lair.*"

As my vision finally faded to black, the last thing I remembered was his face. His gods' blessed face. With his perfectly sculpted nose and his perfectly shaped lips and his eyes that were just the right shade of eggshell blue and how I wanted to rip them right out of his pretty head.



## RHYDIAN

I'd wanted Rieka in my arms again since I turned my back on her in that hallway when she unceremoniously kicked me out of her bed. From the moment she'd lied to me about not remembering my name. The way her heartbeat quickened at that blatant lie had been amusingly delicious. I'd wanted to go back in the room and discuss had really happened that night and ask her to stay in Keltjar another day so we could correct the misunderstanding. Perhaps with her screaming my name instead of denying it.

What I didn't want was to have to knock her unconscious to prevent her from gouging my eyes out. That little trick of hers, getting in my head like that was unexpected. I'd never met a Brute who could do that. Perhaps that was why her price was so high.

I'd been planning on talking to her privately, but after connecting with her, skin-to-skin, I'd felt the weakness in her blood. The redheaded Apex who had rushed to her side in *The Mess Hall* claimed she hadn't eaten anything in three days. I'd taken her straight to Sal. It took a single moment for Sal's taint to inform her that Rieka was not only famished but she was severely dehydrated as well.

"Why hasn't she been eating?" I asked the redheaded woman who refused to leave Rieka's side. Wolves were such a loyal breed. Eleen,

who'd followed me after my utterance in the mess, stared at the young woman, just as curious as myself for the answer. Dark complexion and hair a mix of burnt orange and brown, her hand poised against the edge of Rieka's cot, she answered without hesitation.

"She gave away her smoked meat. We didn't know she wasn't eating alongside us." The news caused Sal to fetch something else from a shelf and add it to her tray.

Eleen threw her dark hair over her shoulder in frustration, her normally full lips pulled into a thin line. A clear indication of her mood. She turned her copper eyes on me. "Rhydian, is it true?"

"Is what true?" Sal asked as she prepared the fluids to administer to Rieka. Eleen kept her eyes on me, her gaze burning a hole into the side of my head. I couldn't blame her though. After the shit I pulled with Oric, I was surprised *she* hadn't punched me yet.

With her arms crossed over her chest, Eleen responded bluntly. "Rhydian says the new girl here is his wife."

Sal's brows raised in astonishment. "Is she?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Eleen's expression was one of divine fury.

I ignored her against my better judgment and chose to watch Sal instead as she hovered over Rieka's sleeping frame. The Organic had her hand suspended over Rieka's right arm, her head making those small minute movements she did when she was using her taint. When she had found it, the vein she wanted in Rieka's arm, Sal expertly inserted the needle.

At the sudden quickening of Rieka's pulse, I first thought it was brought on by the pain of the needle, but no one ever felt Sal's needles. Then I saw her face, Rieka was wide awake, her nostrils flared and glaring at Sal's hand where it touched her arm. I chanced it, speaking to her with the voice inside my head. *"If you can hear me, keep your mouth shut or you'll get us both killed."*

Her head snapped to me, her eyes narrowing. **"Keep your thoughts to yourself Bloodhound."**

*"You started it."*

She turned her attention back to Sal. "Get your hand off me. Please." Sal quickly obliged, choosing to take up a different task. Away from us.

"Rieka, this guy says he's your husband, is that true?" the redhead asked, her tone one of familiarity. A bunkmate I'd wager.

Rieka's gaze cut through me, a razor of a thousand cuts. "Should you tell them or should I?" she said aloud, her tone daring. Eleen simply continued to glare, her defensive nature likely to interfere in this conversation if I didn't do something about it.

Tomas, who had accompanied us to *MedCom* due to Rieka's violent outburst, and who took his position as Train Justice more seriously than most, would not leave unless he deemed the incident mediated. This could cause issues since he was quite the constant observer, and had not taken his eyes off Rieka since he arrived.

"Could my wife and I have a moment of privacy please?" I nudged my head in the direction of *The Cantina* carriage door where a crowd had formed following our altercation and prompt departure. Tomas took my hint and swiftly steered Eleen and Sal away from the bed, the redhead taking the slower approach, her gaze lowering and then rising as she surveyed me. Then as she passed, she paused and sniffed the air beside my head. A satisfied smile took shape. "You've got good taste in husbands, Ree," she said over her shoulder to my "wife."

Rieka's expression was full of contempt. ***"Even if the Pillars of the World were collapsing, and the God Sphere falling, I would never be your wife!"***

I smiled my most endearing smile and carefully approached the bed, turning my back on the exit.

*"Can you please remove that scowl from your face or our audience will think I'm lying."*

***"You are lying!"*** Her eyes fixed me with a violent glare as I moved to sit on the crate by her bed. Pure predator, Rieka angled her body with mine, refusing to allow me any vantage over her weakened state. With the fluid tube still attached to her arm, she turned to sit on the edge of the bed.

I mustered the voice of a relieved spouse and spoke loud enough for any Brute at the door to hear. "I can't believe you are here."

Yet for her alone, I said, *"I'm going to touch your hands, please play along."*

***"I'd rather not. I'd like to keep my bodily autonomy thanks."*** Hatred laced her words.

The ones she spoke aloud however were indifferent. "Neither can I."

I indicated to the carriage exit. *"Do we still have an audience?"*

Her scowl remained unchanged. ***"Yes."***

*"Then let me take your hand if you want to remain breathing."*

Her heart rate spiked. Feeling a threat in my words no doubt. Yet she still let me take her hand, her skin slightly cold to the touch. When she didn't rebuke the contact, I took the other as a lover would and caressed them, my thumb rubbing circles where her gloves didn't prohibit contact.

"My darling, I'm so sorry I didn't tell you the truth. I was trying to keep you safe."

She scoffed. "Safe?"

*"Choose your words carefully, Rieka,"* I warned her in my thoughts.

The harsh lines on her face softened, that piercing grey stare falling to our held hands. She spoke loud enough for our audience to hear.

"After how we parted the last time we met." And then she continued silently in that way of hers. Into my mind. ***"Where you kidnapped Kris and sold Blessed to slavers."***

"I swore an oath to find you," she said aloud, before effortlessly switching to her inner voice once more. ***"To kill you if I ever saw you again."*** First demure and sweet, then antagonistic and hateful.

Beneath those long white lashes darkened thunderstorms rolled in fury within the icy grey.

*"You could try,"* my inner voice purred. *"But then you would never get off this train. God Killer."* Her expression faltered.

*The buyer was telling the truth. She had killed a god.*

I hadn't believed it until this very moment. Somehow the buyer not only knew this about her, but they knew she would be on the rail

because she was a Brute. A fact I had severely missed.

With our audience still listening, I added, "I will do everything I can to protect you."

It wasn't exactly enticing, getting this reaction out of her. I wanted her to seethe with desire, not rage. But my desires no longer mattered, not where Rieka was concerned. I needed more information, and if antagonising her was the only way to do that, I would.

*"You have got to be the first person in the history of Idica to actually kill a god."*

She ripped her hands from mine.

***"What do you want?"*** her inner voice demanded.

There was a mark on her chin, the skin broken and grated. I lifted my hand to touch her there and she flinched. As she turned her head to avoid contact I saw the long red line beneath her jaw. I seized her chin in my hand and she froze in my grasp. Rope burn, the kind that only came from a noose.

***"Courtesy of your Kensillan friends,"*** her inner voice spat.

I leaned in. *"You're alive, are you not?"* Her breath hitched when I stopped, barely an inch from her lips.

*Your body certainly remembers me.*

***"I really wish it didn't."***

*"You heard that?"* I asked. Those icy pools turned glacial, cold and unforgiving as she stared at me beneath snow-white lashes, her jaw set into a hard line.

***"Obviously. But what isn't obvious is why you are even alive in a place with so many Blessed."*** Rieka pulled my hand from her chin and placed it in her lap where she began to rub circles over my knuckles with her thumb. An act. The caring lover.

I was careful to control my heart rate as her next words were spoken.

***"It can't have been easy hiding what you are. I wonder how they would react to find out they had a Bloodhound in their midst?"***

It wasn't a stretch of the imagination to assume that because Hemopaths were ostracised in the outside world, here on the rail I

would be too. This could work in my favour.

I slid my other hand over hers, halting her caress.

*"Probably the same way they'd react to finding out the truth about you."*

The muscles in her jaw clenched. ***"I think I'd fare better. The gods don't have a particularly welcome place here."***

*"You may be right. But you'll still be stuck here. That collar is bound to you until death."*

***"Unless I make a trade."***

*"Make a trade with a god?"* It was my turn to scoff. *"I think I'd have more luck with that trade than you. Bloodhound vs God Killer. I know which I find more enticing. No Rieka. I think we're stuck together."*

Her gaze darkened, her tone turning savage. ***"You expect me to pretend to be your wife until the day I die?"***

*"Certainly not. The deal was to deliver you by Marian 1st. That's when the buyer is expecting you."* The timeline wasn't ideal. Six months was an eternity on the rail. A lot could go wrong in that time. But that was the deal I'd made and I was bound to it.

Rieka slowly removed her hands from my grasp. ***"You sold me?"***

I couldn't sense the taint in her blood which could mean very few possibilities. However since only Blessed ever survived the Lobby before becoming a collared prisoner of the rail, those possibilities were very quickly whittled down.

*"They were very insistent too,"* I admitted. *"The buyer knew exactly where I'd find you too, though they forgot to mention the part about you being—"* I paused to gauge her reaction. *"Stilled."*

It was the most vulgar of insults, to be Stilled was to essentially be neutered as a Devolved Human. Sundering required one to physically inhibit their taint. Stilling was entirely mental and a punishment that befell one who had insulted a god so profoundly that they would let the Tainted one live a half-life rather than kill them. It was the only feasible explanation for why she was still alive after killing a god. It would also account for why the buyer wanted her and why I'd mistaken her for human.



Rieka's nostrils flared. **"You bastard. Where is Kris, is she alive?"**

*"She was when I left her."*

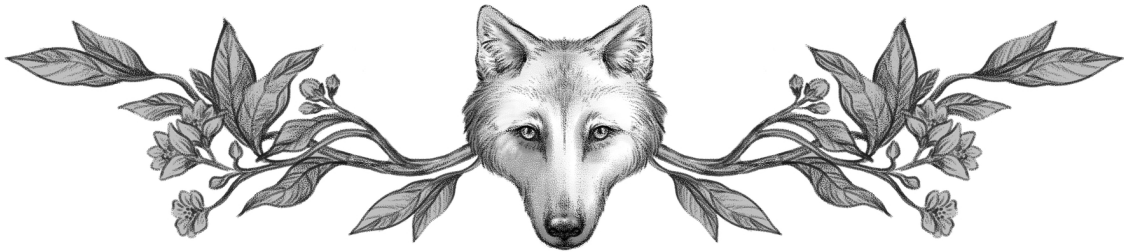
**"Why are you doing this?"**

*"Because it amuses me. Because I want to. Because I'm a bastard Bloodhound. Take your pick. I don't really care. What I care about is you staying alive, do you think you can manage that, wife?"*

Icy venom fuelled her glare. Rieka leaned towards me and stopped so close that her breath tickled my beard. She raised her hand to cup my cheek. "I missed you, husband," she said aloud as her thumb caressed my lips.

Simultaneously, dripping with malice and vitriol her inner voice declared, **"I hope you bleed to death, Bloodhound."**

I removed her hand from my face and brought it to my lips where I feathered a kiss over her fingers. *"And I thought we were getting along nicely."*



## RIEKA

A party was the last thing I expected to happen in this place. Perhaps my mistake was assuming I knew anything at all.

These people had lived on this prison rail for decades, some born on it, why shouldn't they have parties when the occasion called for it? The carriage smelled of bootleg whiskey and excitement, a powerful odour that often accompanied brawls, tobacco, and sex, at least from what I'd seen in the last year. Devout gatherings on this scale usually smelled of overindulgent perfumes, incense and aphrodisiacs all in the name of The Celestials. These festivities were being thrown for the newlyweds. The welcome carriage was now converted into a room fit for a ball.

My "husband" as he kept referring to himself to anyone who asked, stood chatting with a few passengers on the other side of the carriage. He was giving me the appropriate space to acclimate to our new situation. His words.

Everyone else I met, because it seemed they all wanted to meet me, kept calling me Kanyk. They also called Rhydian, Kanyk. He was Kanyk, I was Kanyk. It took me an hour of eavesdropping to realise it was his family name. Rhydian Kanyk. So now due to this "marriage", it was mine too.

My bunk mates had accepted my married status without question, the likely side effect of us only having known one another for three days, and having no reason to doubt anything the other said.

"So does that mean that you won't be sleeping in the bunks anymore?" Tira asked as she sniffed the glass of whiskey on the table, the one S'vara had scrunched her nose up at when Farox had offered it to her. The young Terrestrial's eyes widened eagerly as she snapped up the drink and downed it in one gulp before Farox could stop her.

"No," I answered, watching Rhydian chat with a tall raven-haired Setrali man, the two of them smiling and laughing, moving their hands in that way only the passengers did. Seja it was called. Hentirion had learned at least that much since our arrival. The language had indeed developed in isolation here. The hand gestures, at least according to Hentirion, had become part of the language when words couldn't convey enough meaning. Rhydian spoke it with such familiarity giving rise to the realisation he'd spent quite some time here.

"Are you not going to join Rhydian in his bunk?" Hentirion asked, indulging himself in a glass of the mulled wine that was being served from wooden barrels some passengers had been rolling into the carriage when I arrived.

"No."

**"Someone is still pissed."** I glared over at Saska. The tattooed Pazgari was lying with his head on Emil's lap, his third whiskey resting on his muscular chest and unable to keep his thoughts quiet.

"He knows where to find me if he needs me." My name fell from Rhydian's lips, a motion of his hands accompanying it. The gesture made me curious, just not enough to talk to him.

The man was a Bloodhound, a traitor to his kind, to all Blessed. To me. He'd sold Kris to slavers and now I was in bed with him. Literally. As his wife.

*I hate him.*

He was everything that was wrong with our kind. We were already feared across half the continent for the blessings in our blood, for the feats we could accomplish, but to enslave your own kind for

money? It took a certain kind of person to callously do something so....

So inhuman, so *monstrous*.

And I was now married to the man as far as everyone was concerned. I would forever be associated with him both personally and sexually due to one single word. Wife. The collar around my neck may as well have been attached to a leash in his hand. This man had tethered me to himself against my will and I would never forgive him for it. Perhaps I should let him sleep in my bunk and introduce him to Etrina.

***"You keep looking at me like that and someone is going to think you want to go somewhere private."***

I scoffed as he glanced at me from over his friend's shoulder. *"You will never touch me like that again."*

***"If that is your wish."*** Even his voice in my head had that lilting earnestness. It was infuriating.

His body suddenly became rigid, his eyes alert as his attention was drawn to something behind me. I turned and found a man approaching our group. Hentirion's face lit up at the appearance of the elderly gentleman.

"Kosha," our unofficial leader said, addressing the tall man. I relaxed. This was the councilman who Hentirion had met yesterday. He'd attempted to welcome our group to the train once before but saw fit to leave us alone since our recent loss.

The council was apparently what equated to a government in this prison, dictating or rather ensuring the customs of this place were maintained. They just didn't dish out punishment for the murder of other passengers it seemed.

Hentirion attempted a Seja gesture when the man stopped before him, a greeting judging by the mirrored gesture that was returned. He was handsome for a man in his late years. Broad-shouldered and dressed in the same fashion as the majority of the other passengers, a collaboration of cultural pieces symbolising the mixing pot that were the train's prisoners, in particular, the robe he wore. A Deogn robe, with its thick fabric and embroidered gold stitching, would not have been out of place on the promenade of Aronbok's High Street.

Unlike men his age in Deos who remained clean-shaven to appear youthful, Kosha bore a well-kept greying beard and moustache to accompany a thick head of white well-groomed hair, which only enhanced his already handsome face.

"How are you finding the barrel whiskey?" he asked in thick accented Prean, his eyes skirting over to me as he spoke. Hentirion smiled. "Tastes expensive."

He wasn't wrong. I didn't plan on a repeat of Keltjar, but I had tasted the whiskey. Better than anything Engar had managed to get up the mountain.

Kosha leaned to his left, his weight distributed on the wooden cane in his hand. "It should." He indicated to the thin rakish man over by the barrels, the one pouring out the drinks. "Tollen was the best brewer west of Rinnisar."

"That makes sense," Farox said before prying a second glass from Tira's hand. The robust man picked her up with one arm and dropped her beside S'vara on the bench, a resounding "No more," coming from his lips.

"And how are you finding it here Rieka, may I call you that?" The old man's eyes were as dark as pewter.

"That is the name I go by."

Hentirion stepped aside so Kosha could approach, greeting me with the same gesture. "I understand you come to us from The Hetra?"

"I do, yes."

Standing at least six feet tall, with my head only reaching his chest, Kosha looked more like a retired military general than the politician he purported to be. He moved and everyone held their breath. The chandelier glinted off the collar around his neck, a dainty blue neckerchief tied beneath it. The collar was older, the metal aged, but no less identical to my own. "I don't think we have had more than three Kanahari on board in all my nine and sixty years." He smelled of parchment, pine, and—

*Deogn sweet limes?*

The scent of the red citrus fruit was faint, but I'd spent enough time around it to know. The scent was unmistakable.

"I didn't even know my grandson travelled that far north on his supply runs." That word caught me off guard, as did Kosha's thoughts.

***"You are not who I would have chosen for him."***

As if sensing my discomfort, Rhydian's inner voice cut through. ***"You heard something in his head, didn't you? If you don't want him to suspect anything stay calm, he'll pick up on your heart rate if you don't."***

I smiled up at the old man and responded to his spoken comment. "Lucky me he did."

"He's like you?" I asked Rhydian, moving so that my back was blocking his view of his grandfather.

Rhydian chose to respond with a pun. ***"It runs in the blood."***

I wanted to ask this man what laws he abided by that would allow one passenger to kill another without repercussions. How could Bennic's murderer just walk around freely, unpunished? I wanted to berate him and this entire place. But that would be an emotional response.

A population this large didn't come about by allowing passengers to kill one another indiscriminately.

I was missing something. Logic dictated it would be the wrong move to cause a stir right now. The party was being held in my and his grandson's honour, arguing with the councilman over the ludicrousness of their laws would draw too much attention. There were too many Blessed ears. And I did not know how this Kosha would react to being confronted.

If Rhydian was to be trusted at his word, which at this stage I was still reticent to do, Kosha could just as well be a Bloodhound like his grandson. A traitor to all Blessed kind. He could boil my blood for simply speaking up. No. Things had changed. Rhydian said Kris was alive. I needed to find her and I certainly couldn't do that if I got myself killed for being ignorant.

My bunkmates made a pathetic effort to hide their interest in the conversation, occasionally glancing over the top of their glasses with keen interest. Except for Saska. He didn't look interested in much of anything. He'd fallen asleep on Emil's knee, looking like one of those

life drawings that emerging artists would sell in their stall on Artists Row.

"Indeed." Kosha casually spun his cane. "You may have just saved me the effort of chaining him to the train myself." His voice was stony and rough, the kind that belonged to a soldier who'd shouted orders for decades wearing away at their vocal cords. Like my father's voice.

When I admitted my confusion regarding his comment, the man shifted again on his cane. "You, my dear. You are the reason my grandson is likely to stay aboard the train. I believe his words were, 'If I loved a woman as deep as the ocean I could never part from her, and only when I've met such a woman will I marry her'."

**"Behind you."** Pine and earth enveloped me as Rhydian slid his hand around my waist, pressing his body into my side. The scent was decadent in the alcohol embroiled carriage.

"And I did." His embrace tightened. I gritted my teeth behind soft lips. "And it was never my intention to bring her back here."

Kosha made a direct gesture towards me. "And yet here she stands Alastair."

"Alastair?" I slid my hand across the leather of his jacket, letting my hand rest on his hip.

**"And I suppose Rieka is your birth name?"** his inner voice chided whilst his gaze remained on his grandfather. "I would rather Rieka be anywhere else grandfather."

I turned into him, casually sliding my hand up his chest, gazing up into those obnoxious eyes. "I did not think you were the romantic sort, Rhydian?" Careful to ensure my tone didn't suggest the venom with which I held his name.

The councilman gave his grandson the highest of raised brows. How I longed to hear what thought aroused that reaction in the old man, but unless Kosha was thinking of me directly, the voice in his mind remained silent.

Kosha turned his gaze on me, scrutinizing me, the sour scent of pity perfuming the space between us., "I fear my grandson has done you an injustice, Rieka. How did you ever agree to marry him?"

It appeared we were unconvincing as newlyweds. The moment those words had left his lips his next thought was to question if we were even married.

*"He doesn't believe us,"* I told Rhydian. He responded by taking my hand from his chest and squeezing it in a false display of intimacy.

Keeping my focus on the councilman, instead of the desire I had to rip my hand from his grandson, I sighed. "I was drunk."

"You were drunk?" Kosha's shoulders squared up as he glared at his grandson. It was a little satisfying if I was being honest.

***"What are you doing?"*** Rhydian's inner voice warned.

I ignored him. "I was drunk. My friend Krisenya decided we should play a game of 'Have you ever?'. Neither of us should drink, we don't have particularly strong tolerances, and about halfway through our second bottle of Torberry Wine, she asked the both of us, 'Have you ever been married?' I said no. And then Rhydian said...."

"Do you know what his reply was?" I asked, hoping my expression came off earnest in the eyes of the councilman as I recounted what memories I had of that night back in Keltjar. Thankfully those events had been absent of Leon or that conversation could have gone in a very different direction.

A crowd had begun to form around us. My bunkmates no longer hid their interest, quite pointedly eavesdropping on the conversation, with more passengers gathering by the second. I waited just long enough that the pause didn't seem intentional, I wanted as many people as possible to hear my words. Rhydian wanted to make sure people believed the lie, how better than with an origin story?

Kosha stroked his beard. "I would assume he said no, unless there is another wife out there he has failed to inform me of?"

I turned to Rhydian, my expression painfully doting. "Tell your grandfather what you said."

The tone of this thought was coarse. ***"You're enjoying this."***

*"Quite the contrary. I loathe it almost as much as I loathe you."*

When Rhydian finally answered, his eyes, a tumultuous blue remained locked on mine. "I asked her to be my wife."

***"Don't lie to him!"*** was the only warning he gave.



"Three days later, supply run done, we're standing in a forest, a temple to the Eldertides and I'm swearing an oath." Not a single word uttered was a lie. For a split second, the cold unfeeling callousness that I'd felt since that moment in the forest vanished. I saw the man who had spoken those words to me in The Old Man's Hearth. I saw the way in which he had smiled when he leaned across the table, my shocked face amusing him. How I knew simply by scent he wasn't lying. The smile he had worn was so genuine, so bright it reached his eyes and I couldn't look away until his lips were on mine. How he had causally kissed me like we'd done it a thousand times before. I was somewhat thankful I couldn't remember the rest of the evening.

***"Well done."***

*"Fuck you!"*

"Has he said he loves you yet?" came a small familiar voice. I don't think I will ever get used to the public display of one's blessings in this place. Deogns only displayed themselves in the privacy of their own homes. Standing behind Kosha's robe was Ghena, her tail wagging behind her.

"They're married. Of course they've said it," whined Tira from her position on the bench. S'vara was having to hold her knees down, her hooves clacking on the timber floor. The young Terrestrial appeared to be a fidgety drunk.

Another lie moved its way to my tongue, the taste bitter. Yet before I could speak it, one dripped from Rhydian's own lips. Removing himself from my side, Rhydian bent until he was at eye level with the young pup. "I told her first." Ghena smiled at him, her hand reaching up to scrunch his beard. "I told her I couldn't live another day without her, and as soon as I had built us a home, I would take her there."

She suddenly growled at him. It was small, not enough to warrant a rebuke. Being of the same breed I was privy to things other Brutes were not. Like how our vocalisations were more than just growls.

That little growl she just made was to signal her dissatisfaction. "You're going to leave us?" she grumbled in Preat.

Rhydian's tone rose in false hurt. "Leave you? I could never do that. I would visit the train every day, just like all the other Runners do."

Ghena's little face scrunched up. "Promise?"

"When have you known me to break a promise?" he added, petting her head. Ghena leaned into it before running off to an elderly woman's side, a different woman from the one I had seen that first night.

"So how is it then that she is here, Rhydian?"

All heads, including my own, turned to the woman who'd spoken. Long dark tresses fell like velvet over her shoulders, the red undertones glowing in the illumination of the Bright-lights hanging from the chandelier above. Underneath that oceanic tang she gave off, something acrid waded through. "If you were intent on building this safe place to keep her, how is it that she is here, amongst the likes of us, collared?"

Cutting off Rhydian before he could answer, I gave my reply. "Bad judgement on my part. I followed someone I thought was Rhydian, and they turned out to be someone else entirely. It is as simple as that." I plastered a caring expression on my face, feeling violated with every movement of muscle.

"Well, I for one am glad you are here, however unfortunate the circumstances." Kosha tugged on his beard again. **"Perhaps you will be the reason he stays aboard the train, Rieka",** his inner voice said. **"I'd much rather he chose to abide because of his oath, but a man in love will do."**

*A man in love!*

Why had I not thought of that? I'd done it before. I escaped Aronbok, crossed through Carfen's Pass, made it over the Deogn border and all the way to The Hetra because of a man in love. Several actually. I had become exactly who they wanted, and they had done exactly what I required of them. I needed freedom and they gave it to me, mile by mile.

Rhydian *was* pleasing to look at. He had a cocksure way about him, standing there beside his grandfather, hands in the pockets of his red leather jacket. A charm that some might even find attractive.

It wouldn't be hard to force myself to see him in a different light, however minute that light would be. I'd been with worse men, some who had entirely unappealing physical traits but who I found reasons to like to withstand being in their presence. I'd been with beautiful men who only wanted me for what was between my legs and even then, I found reasons to be in their presence if it meant getting to the next town, the next city. Why should Rhydian be any different?

He cocked a single eyebrow at me, and for the first time in years, I was grateful my blessing could not betray my thoughts without my choosing.

*"I'm going to kiss you now,"* I said to him alone.

If I'd startled him, he'd done well to mask it. Rhydian removed both hands from his pockets. ***"If you wish it."***

I don't hesitate. Hesitation leads to regrets. And I promised myself no more regrets. I reached for him, cupping his face between my hands and I brought his lips to mine. And I waited to see his reaction. At first nothing, my lips touched his, the bristles of his beard brushing against my chin. Then with an untamed wildness that caught my breath in my throat, Rhydian kissed me back. Breathed me in. Devoured the very air from my lungs.

He pressed into me, his body desperately trying to merge with mine, his hand on my lower back seeming to fuse with my spine, keeping me tethered to him. Each second passed into oblivion as my body, every cell of it traitorous, recalled with clarity exactly how this had felt. My mind was able to forget what my body could not. Rhydian cupped my neck with surprising tenderness, kissing me in deviously languid motions that I found myself entirely unable or even wanting him to stop.

I didn't know how much time had passed when we finally pulled apart. Long enough that Kosha had walked away. Long enough for our heartbeats to have fallen in sync.

Rhydian kept his hand around my waist as I looked up at him, my breath once again my own.

***"Quite the actress. Even I thought that was sincere."*** He ran a thumb over his bottom lip. Keeping his eyes on me, I gently

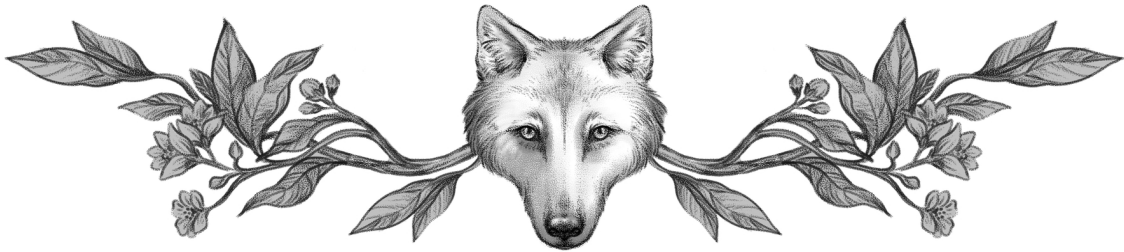
grasped his hand and drew it to my lips, his scent so close I could taste it on my tongue.

*"I'm going to be honest with you," I told him as my lips teased his skin. "Since you've been nothing but honest with me, Rhydian. You're going to fall in love with me."*

His brows knitted. ***"Is that so?"***

Softly and methodically, one by one I kissed the tops of his knuckles. *"You're going to fall so madly in love with me that the idea of selling me would break you."*

The corners of his mouth slowly lifted into a smile. His hand twisted in mine until it was pressed against his chest and I could feel the beating of his heart through the tips of my fingers. The rhythm was steady as he leaned forward and brushed his lips against my cheek. ***"Is that a bet?"***



## RIEKA

The train never seemed to quiet. I'd left the party nearly an hour ago, and one would assume when the guests of honour left the part, it too would end; and yet I could still hear laughter in the other sleepers since every carriage door was open to the next. It was likely due to the inebriated states of at least half of the train's passengers, a way to prevent passengers from getting stuck between the carriages because they couldn't see the door buttons.

I could hear the sweet mumblings of two Feline-Blessed in their bunk at the end of the compartment, and I could smell S'vara in the next carriage with Tira and the results of her one drink on the washroom floor. There was no sense of privacy in this place, everything was in view of everyone; from the fact not a single washroom had a door and that everyone shared *The Bathhouse*, to the fact couples fucked in the bunks, their moans heard by anyone who either walked past or was lucky enough to sleep below them. A fact that Saska either cared nothing for or found appealing considering he was in the middle of fucking someone's brains out when I arrived back at our bunk.

It had taken me a moment to realise who it was considering a person's scent changed dramatically during the act. The Deogn man's face was buried in Saska's neck, kissing him as though his life

depended on it. I learned something else at that moment too. As Emil's large hands braced themselves against the muscles of the smaller man's brightly tattooed back, the two rips I'd seen in Saska's singlet that first night were because he was an Alatus. Yet whatever wings he had possessed before coming to this place were gone. Someone had cut them from his back. I'd seen sundering like this before, but where my mother's roots were cleanly cut and organically mended so the skin had grown over the bone roots, Saska's were raw and jagged, as though someone had cleaved them from his body. The roots still reacted when the muscles in his back rippled.

Neither one paid any attention to me when I crawled into my bunk. The sound of their lovemaking was drowned out by my thoughts, thoughts of Rhydian. Pondering how best to do exactly what I'd told him. How to make him fall in love with me. Telling him had been a gamble, but for a man clearly versed in the art of deception, he would see through my ploy before I could even establish it. It had been my only option. Rhydian knew what to expect and I didn't have to hide my motivations. And it wouldn't take as long as it had the others. As soon as I found out the type of woman that Rhydian was attracted to, I would become that. Men usually fell hard when their dream woman was offering herself to them on a golden platter.

I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I missed him. Rhydian had entered the sleeper carriage, pillow in hand and I hadn't noticed until he tossed the damn thing onto *my* bunk.

"What are you doing?" I sat up hastily as he peeked inside the bunk, parchment and ink mixed amongst the pine scent.

"Why are you wearing all your clothes?" He gazed at my coat. I was wearing it, along with every other piece of clothing I owned. "You know the train has atmospheric controls, right?"

Yes. I was aware the train was heated. I'd sweated right through my underclothes the first night. But I wasn't inclined to just leave them lying around, regardless of the marks those Spindles had weaved into the fabric.

Rhydian removed his leather jacket, threw it into the bunk and climbed in beside me, barely flicking a glance at my hand where it rested on my boot. Where Etrina was sheathed.

He shifted to get comfortable and saw that I still hadn't moved.

***"Was this not what we agreed?"*** his inner voice asked as he rolled around to face me. ***"I can leave if you wish?"***

Slowly, I lowered myself back on the mattress, my back to the wall. Not a position I'd normally put myself in. But since he smelled of nothing more than curiosity, no antagonism, no animosity, I allowed myself to relax.

*"You can stay."*

Rhydian continued to stare at me as if expecting me to say something more. My silence seemed to unnerve him. ***"You're serious about this aren't you, you're really going to try to seduce me."***

*"You climbed into my bed Rhydian. Not the other way around."*

He laughed under his breath. ***"Rieka, I don't want you."***

The cord of his shirt hung loose dangling on the mattress, the material gaping open, revealing those intricate tattoos. I saw another rune I recognised. *Ar'u. Strength in perseverance.* I took hold of the cord and twisted the leather around my finger.

*"I've heard that before. Never quite sticks."*

His eyes flicked down to my hands, trailed up my arms then stopped at my lips. Slowly, as if the act gave me pleasure, I took my bottom lip between my teeth and nibbled on it. The corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly.

Pine needles and damp soil after a rain. Had he smelled like this that night? Apexes were alcohol intolerant by nature, prone to unusual reactions, but it didn't stop us from drinking so my memory was hazy. I could recall certain things from the inn, his lips, the drinking games, the feeling of warm muscled skin under my fingertips, a flash of gold as his hair brushed over my cheek, but nothing else.

The men who I'd been with before were all the same. I always knew what they were feeling simply by the chemicals their body expressed. That combined with their heart rates provided everything

I needed to obtain what I desired from them. But with Rhydian, even this close, he was unreadable. I could scent his desire certainly, his blessing could not control that, but his heartbeat—

Steady. Unnaturally so. It was damn frustrating.

The end of my braid lay by his hand. Rhydian reached out and began playing with it. ***"Is that all it took with the others—I presume there were others for you to be this confident?"***

*"Enough to know I'll eventually get what I want. And what I want is to not be handed over to someone who would consider me a possession and not a person. Is that so hard to fathom in that overbaked loaf of a head of yours?"*

He smiled, revealing a dimple. *"You want your freedom and I can understand that, but it will not be me who gives it to you Rieka. Your price is too steep."*

*"A price means nothing when it comes to love, Rhydian."*

***"I have never given my heart to anyone. What makes you think I'll give it to you?"***

*"You may be able to mask your heartrate around me, but you can't hide your scent. Desire is a remarkably powerful smell. Tell me you honestly don't want me?"*

Rhydian stopped his fiddling and looked up. Blue eyes searched my face, the colour a turbulent sea of chaos. ***"Why tell you something you already know? I find you to be one of the most attractive women I've ever had the pleasure of sharing a bed with Rieka. But sex and love are two entirely different desires."***

*"In my experience, one has always led to the other."*

***"Then someone taught you wrong."*** Rhydian let go of my hair, took my hand and pulled the cord from it. He turned it palm-side up, undid the fastening of my glove and then in slow calculated movements, began tracing the lines of my palm.

***"I may want you beneath me Rieka. My hands running down the curves of your naked body. My cock inside you, my lips sucking at your raw nipples as you cry my name through breathless moans. But it won't be because of any seduction of yours. If I take you Rieka, it will be because I want to."***



He dropped my hand between us and patted it like I were a child whose efforts he needed to commend.

Rhydian relaxed back into the bed, the arm closest to me wedged under his head like a pillow. He was insufferable as well as egotistical. Very well, drastic measures were needed.

I braced myself on the bed until I was hovering over him, my face so close I could taste the mint on his breath. If I were to speak aloud my lips would brush his. *"Care to make that bet you so graciously offered earlier?"*

It was my only chance. He had told Ghena he always kept his promises. I guess I would find out if he was a man of his word.

Rhydian didn't move. He didn't flinch as I continued to loom over him. I took his silence as his willingness to listen.

*"On the day I win, the day you tell me you love me, you make me an oath. You Bloodhounds make those, don't you? You swear to me, in blood, that you will never make me anyone's slave, in any capacity. You're so confident I'll fail, what is there to lose?"*

His head tilted, the look in his eyes contemplative. ***"Only if you agree to my conditions, to be revealed at my discretion, abided by you without question. Deal?"***

The fact he never said how many conditions should have made me hesitate in responding, but I refused to get turned over to someone who considered people property. If agreeing to this bastard's weird or kinky conditions meant I would be saving myself from slavery, then there was no question what my answer would be.

I leaned down and lightly touched my lips to the spot just along his cheekbone, so gently that anyone awake enough to catch a glimpse wouldn't doubt my love for this duplicitous oaf. *"Deal."*

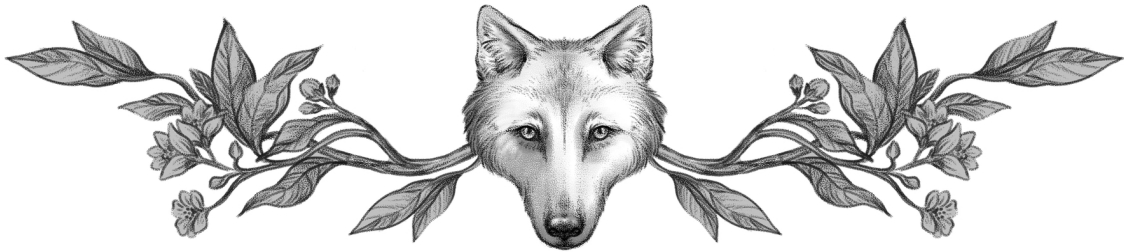
Promptly, I withdrew my body from its proximity to his and closed my eyes to sleep, recording to memory the change in his scent when I kissed him. I did affect him at least.

Then just when I could hear the sound of his breathing slowing, falling into that steady rhythm of early sleep, I spoke once more, not caring if he heard me or not.

*"When you do take me Rhydian—because you will—it will be because I let you."*

That night as he slept, I took Etrina and marked the bed frame with a single tally.

*177 days until Marian 1<sup>st</sup>*



## RIEKA

CONDITION #1: EVERY DAY, 2 HOURS BEFORE 7TH HOUR MEAL GO TO TRAINING IN THE FIGHT HALL UNTIL I SAY OTHERWISE. YOU MUST PARTICIPATE WITHOUT OBJECTIONS.

The tattered piece of parchment appeared to be ripped from a book, the words scribbled in a delicate black hand.

He'd also left a leather tie. For my hair.

There wasn't much point in arguing with the condition, since I'd been the one to agree to his terms. I stripped down to what I would call *less*, tidied up my braid, applied some salve to my chin and neck and stepped into the main thoroughfare of the sleeper only to be halted by the sudden appearance of running children.

One after the other they sped through the carriage, some hand in hand, coming to a stop at the end of the sleeper. More seemed to appear out of the bunks, scuttling down the ladders to join the crowd forming at the exit where they seemed to be waiting for something.

"Rieka!"

I spun around and found Ghena running down the centre of the sleeper towards me. I squatted to greet her, admiring how her ears

happily shifted in my presence. "Are you off to the *Fight Hall*?"

"How did you know?"

She scowled at my answer. "The Runners go there every morning. Littles get kicked out if we even try to watch. It's why the big kids take us to school every morning," she added pointing to a young boy with jet-black hair who was counting the children. There appeared to be at least fifteen, the child in the boy's arms no older than five.

"You have a school here?" I asked the little she-wolf, noticing the lack of a collar on all their necks.

"Course we do silly," Ghena replied. "How else are we to learn to read and write?"

Last night at the party Hentirion had learned an uncomfortable truth about the collars. A third of the population of the rail was collarless because they were born on the train. As far as The Core were concerned, they didn't exist. They were free to come and go from the train whenever they wished. Leave of their own free will. But for some reason most chose to stay. Those that did were called Runners, though he was unable to ascertain what that meant. Just that these collarless passengers were afforded a privilege no one else on the train was.

They were allowed to try to claim one of the collars as their own so they could lay a claim on the rations The Core delivered to the passengers. They could choose to become a prisoner of this place.

To have been born on the train meant one or both of their parents were already aboard. Very few would have survived the death train whilst pregnant. I couldn't imagine any woman wishing to have a child in this place when she could freely leave. Unless she was collared, and a woman like that would have to be aboard a year at minimum to even attempt giving birth here. A third of the population!

A pit opened in my stomach. "Is this the only class?" I asked Ghena.

"No silly." She tapped her chest twice with the word, a gesture in her native tongue. "There are the littles in *The Group Sleepers*, and then there are the littles in the sleepers at the front of the train. Oh, and the big kids have classes later in the day, after their chores."

I dreaded the words that next came. "How many littles are there on the train, Ghena?"

"I don't know. Not that many." She sounded bored, even the rest of her hand gestures looked limp in comparison to the ones I'd seen other passengers use. "Two hundred I think."

*200 children!*

I glanced back over at the small crowd of little Blessed, with their tails and ears showing, as they chatted by the passageway where a young woman stood gazing over them, a slim rectangular device in her hand. She had pale blonde hair and what I assumed were the membranous wings of an Echo. What was surprising about her appearance was the fact her wings were white.

In Deos, her breed of Alatus was rarely seen in the capital guard. My father said any Echo who joined the guard as a recruit undertook their training in Carfen's Pass, their wings better suited for the Erania Range than City Watch. But she was a passenger of the rail and a collarless one at that. It was very likely Kensilla didn't know about her, though what they would do with her if they did know was as much a mystery to me as this train had been four days ago. She flicked her pale blonde hair over her shoulder when she crouched down to speak to a child who had pulled on her dress and called her teacher.

"Rieka, do you have a tail?" Ghena's question caught me off guard.

"Why do you ask?"

Her eyes shone yellow in the light, little canine fangs catching on her lower lip because she hadn't quite worked out how to speak without them being a hindrance, so she had a slight lisp when she spoke in Prean. "You smell different to the other Brutes on the train." She thought the answer in the same moment she spoke it. Which was unsurprising for a child. They tended to speak exactly what they thought.

I offered her my hands to hold her own, a gesture to see if she trusted me. The little she-wolf gave me one of her hands. The one marked with the black pattern. Her hands were so small in comparison, even with those claws that could rip out a man's throat, she was still just a child.

"Perhaps that's because I grew up in a place where I wasn't allowed to show that side of myself as freely as you do. I haven't manifested in a long time."

Her little nose twitched. "No that is not it. Biba doesn't *manifest* anymore either and she doesn't smell like you." I smiled at her mispronunciation.

"And what is it that I smell like? No one has ever told me about my scent before?" I squeezed her hand gently to encourage her to answer.

She looked hesitant, the swishes of her tail slowing. "That sweet stuff, the kind you put in desserts."

Sugar, not entirely surprised.

She paused. "And the other smell is..."

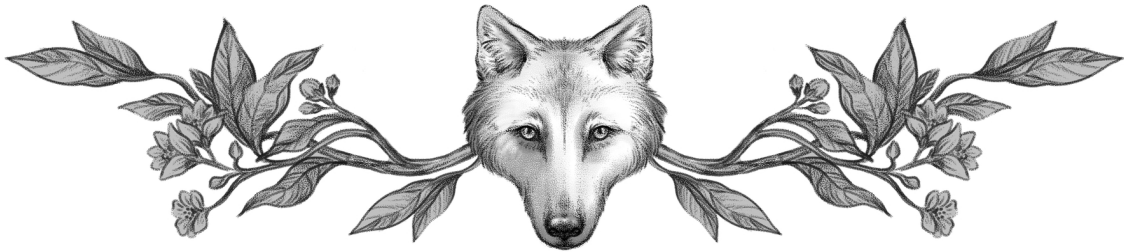
"Ghena!"

The teacher's voice broke my concentration and the woman gestured for her student to return to the crowd.

Ghena motioned farewell and ran halfway to the group who had started to form a chain, hands held, before doubling back. I hadn't yet stood from the crouched position, so I was at face level when she whispered in my ear. "The other scent is blood."

I stood in the alcove of bunks for several minutes after the chain of children departed the sleeper to some unknown carriage down the train, their hands all baring similar marks to Ghena's. I wasn't sure which I was more concerned over. The fact I now knew my scent and wasn't at all surprised by it, or the fact there were two hundred collarless children aboard the train who, in order to stave off starvation, would be permitted to kill another passenger to obtain their collar.

A clock chimed. The source was a large mechanical dial hanging over the exit. It chimed again indicating I was running ten minutes late.



## RIEKA

The *Fight Hall* as Rhydian had called it was the same carriage where the party had been held last night. The very same carriage I had arrived in three nights ago.

The doors were flush to the wall when I entered so I was able to finally gauge the full scope of the carriage. With vaulted ceilings and polished timber walls, the compartment looked reminiscent of a ballroom. Empty benches lined the walls, whilst thick rectangular mats separated the room into thirds. From the ceiling hung four chandeliers, not a single one matching another, as though someone had attempted to repair them over and over again. Loud thuds and shouts echoed off the walls.

A group of passengers were gathered in the centre of the carriage. I didn't particularly want to immerse myself in the stench of that crowd. It was awash with the aroma of lust, and greed, and the unmistakable scent of aggression. Thankfully I found scents I could tolerate. Seafoam and hemp, that was S'vara, and the cedar oil and jarsa spice was Farox right beside her. Though without my senses I wouldn't have recognised him. He had manifested his Drake metamorphic state and was now covered head to toe in scales. As he turned his head to greet me, the second eyelid accustomed to his breed of Apex blinking across his yellow slit pupils, the scales shone

a dark iridescent green. And sprouting out from his thick black waves, curving back over his head was a pair of grey horns, signifying Farox as one of the most dangerous of Drake breeds.

With S'vara's help, my fellow she-wolf having caught my scent, I managed to pierce the crowd and wedge myself between them in the crowd where they had formed a ring around two figures.

They were vastly different in size and shape, the darker-haired one was tall and fair and collared with thin sinuous muscle that reminded me of a skinned hare.

I suppressed the instinct to send that image to the one no longer there to receive it.

A quick short inhale refocused me. The second fighter was blond and much broader than the other man, with thick arms that strained the shirt on his back. He, unlike his sun-deprived opponent, had skin that had not too long ago been kissed by the sun. The golden tinge upon his arms and neck was a stark contrast to many passengers.

The tall one charged at his opponent. And the blond in defence sent him flying over his shoulder with a loud smack. Sweat beaded down his cheek. He turned as he wiped it and locked eyes with me.

Rhydian.

***"You're late."***

I refused to reply.

Rhydian helped his opponent stand. They spoke using one of those hand gestures and then the dark one, clutching his side, made to join the crowd, whilst he moved to the centre of the ring.

"Since my wife was late I'll cut the speech short. Those of you who arrived here three days ago, if you're lucky you'll live a year."

*"What are you doing?"* His words had caused an instant reaction in my bunkmates, all of whom I realised were amongst the crowd. Their heart rates spiked.

Rhydian met my gaze. ***"I'm making sure you survive."***

He began pacing around the circle. "The Venerable Council of Kensilla, our prick benefactors don't care who you were before they collared you, and they don't care what you do whilst you're here. They care about only one thing. The Hunt. A regular event that they broadcast to the nation for their citizens' entertainment, and to



ensure their slaves' continued obedience. Sometime in the next few weeks each of you will be selected to participate. It is my job to see to it that you survive."

"Does everyone have to participate?" It was a woman who spoke, the same one who had asked Hentirion how we could get off the train that first night. She stood with her death train companion behind Rhydian.

"Collared passengers over the age of sixteen have to run in The Hunt," he answered.

"I'm not yet fifteen," came Tira's meek voice.

Murmurs spread throughout the crowd, pity spreading like a spider's web amongst the passengers, all flooding towards the young Terrestrial with the sundered antlers.

Rhydian's inner voice reached out to me. ***"Is that true?"***

All I could do was nod in response. Tira's age had been why our group had been so attentive to her, why we'd been strict with the alcohol at the party. But we never expected this.

Rhydian seemed to take in a deep breath before continuing to speak "You're from the Enibon Islands?"

Tira nodded. "The Deni'Hempina Commune."

His expression remained stern. "I know of them. Their herds are fast. The Hunters are not. If you can outrun them, then you'll survive longer than most."

But he didn't say she'd survive.

"Those of us without collars are Runners. When a Hunt is drawn, we choose to do everything in our power to get you back on the train."

"You voluntarily run in these Hunts, why?" Hentirion asked

A tall collarless man with sandy brown curls spoke up. "Would you leave your family if you knew your presence could keep them alive another day?" Rhydian and the man exchanged a look before he continued.

"The Hunters are human. Don't be afraid to kill them if you find an opportunity. They will certainly not hesitate to kill you. The Core rewards those loyal enough to cull members of The Quarry."

Farox leaned towards me. "Quarry?" he asked.

"Us," S'vara responded bitterly.

*Quarry.* Such an animalistic word, as though were we something to be pursued and rounded up.

Rhydian finished his speech by emphasising that if we wanted to survive, then turning up at training every morning would be the best path to survival.

"I think they've gathered how shitty their situation is, Rhydian." The tall woman I'd seen with Rhydian last night stepped out of the crowd. She had her arms crossed over her chest, her expression board. "Now can we get to the training? Some of us have to work today."

The long rich brown tresses which had been out when we'd first met were braided down her scalp and tucked back up into her hair, a style many of the female passengers in the crowd wore. Their clothes were also of a similar nature—form-fitting tops and trousers with heavy boots.

Rhydian opened his mouth to speak then paused, his gaze falling upon me. "The ring is yours Eelen. Pick your partner."

Eelen did just that, calling out to someone called Mal as she took up a position in the centre of the ring. There was no mat here, just a hardwood floor. Not exactly the ideal surface for fight training.

Mal was a six-foot-three fully manifested Bear-Blessed male, with arms the size of tree trunks and sporting a brown fur coat. Yet as he entered the ring his predatory features transformed back into his human ones. This version of the man was no taller than six-foot-one, had green eyes and a thick brown beard.

I leaned into Farox. "Why would he do that, surely it would be safer to fight in his Brute state?"

"Fight rules," Farox said, his eyes trained on every movement of the much larger Brute. "No taints are permitted in the ring."

"Isn't it counterproductive to have us train without our blessings? Surely Blessed have the advantage against these human Hunters."

If not an advantage over one another. What Brute could win in a fight against someone who could burn the flesh from their bones? Who could win against a Pneumatic who could make the air around you as strong as a boulder and crush you under that weight?

***"The hunters create traps using Toxicant vapour to inhibit their prey before they kill them. I'm teaching you to use what's left. Even the playing field."***

I glared over at my "husband" who had somehow managed to overhear my conversation. He wasn't even looking at me. His entire attention was on Eelen.

"Something about Hunters having methods to prevent us from using our taints. Only physical assaults are possible," Farox added, the membranous skin along his jaw stretching as he flexed it. I could only imagine what assaults a Drake of his characteristics could achieve. A jaw that could stretch wide enough that it was capable of biting a man's face off whole.

Eelen and Mal made a Seja gesture towards one another, touching two fingers to the centre of their foreheads before pulling them away about an inch.

The moment they both dropped their hands, Eelen rushed the larger man and was atop his back in a matter of seconds, having jumped at him and swung her legs around his body.

She was nimble for her tall height. And fast. She appeared to have caught the Brute off guard. But only for a moment. He twisted and caught her in a big-armed grip. Just when it looked as though the match would be over, Eelen bit him. The scent of blood sent the room stiff. At least ten Brutes took a step back from the ring, their faces contorting as they tried to control their blessings. Mal dropped Eelen like a sack of potatoes. She took that opportunity to then kick out his leg, the ground reverberating when he hit the floor. Like a tree cut down in the woods.

This continued for several minutes, one or the other gaining the upper hand, Eelen with her swiftness and Mal, his brute strength. Rhydian circled the two the entire time, occasionally walking over to one of the other collarless in the crowd to whisper something. I eavesdropped the first few times, my curiosity getting the better of me, but after the fifth comment spoken in Seja, his native tongue, I realised I would gain nothing from those conversations. So I returned my attention to the fight.

"Your husband seems to be showing Eelen an awful lot of attention." S'vara's eyes were fixated on Rhydian as she spoke.

"Should they not be? He is teaching a defence class?" He *was* awfully focused on her.

Farox, who had spent the last few minutes of the fight eye fucking the only other female Drake in the crowd, spoke up. "I heard she used to sleep in his bunk."

"We've been aboard four days. How did you hear that?" S'vara asked incredulously.

He smirked, revealing a row of sharp teeth. "I, unlike you two wolves, enjoy *The Bathhouse*."

A loud smack and strangled grunt brought our attention back to the ring where the Bear-Blessed Mal had Eelen pinned beneath him, a hand around her throat.

Rhydian called the match to an end and rushed over to Eelen where he offered her his hand. My "husband" certainly was thorough in checking her for injuries. A little *too* attentive. Perhaps Rhydian had a thing for damsels who needed saving. It wasn't my favourite façade but it was the easiest to sustain long term. And I had six months to endure this man before my life was forfeited.

*I can't jump to conclusions, I need more information.* I found his mind and asked bluntly, "*Were you and Eelen lovers?*"

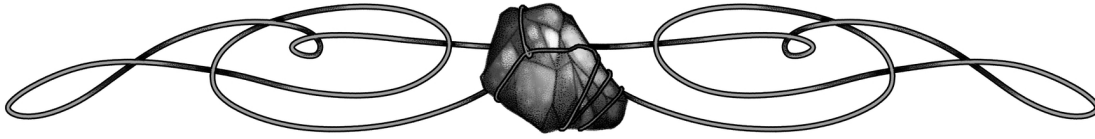
Rhydian's hand paused on the beautiful brunette's arm. "*No wonder she was pissed at you for springing a wife on her,*" I added.

Rhydian kept his hand on Eelen as his inner voice responded. "***You sound jealous.***"

*"Why should I be jealous, you declared your love for me to the entire train, husband."*

***"How could I forget."*** Rhydian then turned from her and looked at me with those damning blue eyes. "Next up, Eelen and Rieka."

He smiled. It was irritatingly confident.



## RHYDIAN

Sal would have said I was being a prick, but Rieka had turned up late. So what better way to determine where her skills stood in terms of defence than pitting her against a woman I trusted. Rieka wasn't exactly forthcoming with any personal information. And I trusted Eleen not to accidentally break her neck, even with the stormy glare she was giving me.

*"Condition #1: you must participate without objection. You agreed,"* I reminded her.

The expression that took over her face was masterful. Within seconds irritation turned to hesitant determination, the look of a woman pretending to be frightened. Her heart rate was fast but not fast enough to be of any concern.

As she approached the ring she shook out her hands, long delicate fingers stretched and curled in nervous anticipation.

Eleen gave me one of her "Are you sure about this?" looks. I wasn't about to be questioned about my treatment of my "wife" in front of our fighters, so I ignored her.

***"Leaving me to the mercy of your ex isn't very husbandly of you,"*** Rieka said guilefully as she took her position on the mat. I circled the ring to get a better viewpoint as both women came to a standstill.

"*Had other husbands, have you?*" I asked as she adjusted the gloves on her hands, tightening the fastenings. They weren't ordinarily allowed but as no one else appeared to object, I kept quiet.

**"No. But I have had several offers."** She kept her eyes on Eelen, who in turn was surveying Rieka. We'd been friends so long that it wasn't hard to predict the water-wielder's inner comments. She was no doubt internally laughing to herself. Rieka had the worst fighting stance.

"*Weren't desperate enough to say yes I suppose.*" Either this was a façade and she was going to hold her own, or Eelen was going to annihilate Rieka on the mat.

*Can she hear these thoughts?*

**"Desperate is not quite the word I'd use."** Rieka followed Eelen's honour gesture, her lack of understanding of Seja's subtlety obvious. But at least it was respectful.

**"Let's say they couldn't provide what I needed."**

"*And what was that?*" I asked

Did she require I talk to her directly as I had been or could she hear all my thoughts and simply chose to respond to those?

**"Isn't it obvious?"** My body tensed at her inner voice. Surely not. Surely she can't be that powerful. The pantheons would have known about people like her. The danger they would pose to the status quo, all their secrets just floating around in their heads, easily accessible. They would kill her on-site if they knew. Lead her to madness.

*This could be very problematic.*

Rieka continued her train of thought as she looked at me over her shoulder.

**"What I want, dear husband is the thing you're going to give me. My freedom."**

Eelen took that opportunity to strike. The space between them vanished in seconds and her fist collided with Rieka's cheek in a resounding thwack, sending Rieka stumbling backward. My friend then crouched down and spun, taking out Rieka's left leg. Her elbow made a nasty sound as her body hit the hardwood floor.

Eleen was playing with Rieka. Her smile as she walked backward admiring her work said as much. Rieka's companions complained from the sidelines only to be held back by contentious looks. New arrivals were always hesitant to defend when they first arrived. That needed to change fast.

Rieka's voice was crisp, regardless of the groaning she was doing from the mat. ***"She's pissed at you for not telling her you got married."*** I already knew that much. Eleen had this way of making your blood boil when she was the one pissed off. Her micro-expressions were works of art; they could send a man's cock straight back up into his body.

*"Hadn't noticed."*

Rieka stood nursing her elbow, her brows furrowing the moment she decided to run at Eleen's turned back. I waited to see exactly how far my "wife's" special talent extended. Would she pick up on the way Eleen shifted onto her backfoot expecting the attack, or would she hear it from Eleen herself? The idea was provoking. Judging by the way Eleen sent Rieka flying over her shoulder, neither now seemed plausible. The hand that she'd used in an attempt to grab hold of the taller woman's hair was now twisted in Eleen's grip as she hovered over Rieka's flattened form. Her breathing was ragged, likely from the impact of getting the air knocked out of her and from the pain of having her arm locked in such a position. Eleen needed only to press with her thumb and Rieka's wrist would snap.

My curiosity peaked, I asked, *"How did you survive the Lobby?"*

Rieka was completely untrained. It was as if she had watched one too many stage fights and expected to be an expert once she stood opposite an opponent.

***"The what?"*** Rieka grimaced when Eleen released her hand and backed up a few steps. My friend was toying with Rieka. She had intentionally left herself open for attack.

*"The train you jumped from. We call it the Lobby."*

The voice in my head, her voice scoffed, ***"And this place is the fucking hotel?"*** Rieka started to circle the ring again, her eyes dashing around her opponent and looking in all the wrong places. She had absolutely no idea what she was doing.

"Do you?"

**"Do I what?"**

Her response made me curious. I had spoken to her as if in conversation. *"Can't you just hear her thoughts, detect what her next move is going to be?"*

Rieka tried another strike and ended up with her arm twisted behind her back before Eleen pushed her away with little effort. Rieka sighed in frustration. **"Not really how it works, husband. I can't just read her mind. Life's not that easy."**

*"So, she needs to be talking to you directly, as though in conversation with you in her head."* That was an intriguing thought.

**"Not just a pretty face after all."** Rieka attempted another run, this time she ended up with her head in the crook of Eleen's elbow. And Eleen held it until Rieka's face began to turn the slightest shade of purple. Not delighted that I had ascertained what I needed to know about her defensive skills and correctly surmised that it was either dumb luck or a god's will that she survived *The Lobby*, I gestured to Eleen to release her. Rieka fell to the floor, flat on her face, her cheeks regaining colour with every breath she took.

I was going to have to be careful with my thoughts around her, and I was going to have to come up with something to convince the others to be wary of their thoughts as well without drawing suspicion on my already suspicious "wife."

*What a world, I'm policing thoughts now? Fuck!*

I approached her as the dutiful husband I was and helped her to her feet. The leather tie at the end of her hair had finally come loose, so I retied it for her, our proximity keeping her companions at a distance. Those grey eyes were eerily focused, storm clouds ready to erupt with lightning. Such a contradiction to the feeble softly smiling woman before me.

"I think we're going to have to have some one-on-one lessons in the foreseeable future." I then thanked her, silently, for the compliment.

Her expression gave no indication of the confusion her inner voice held. **"What compliment?"**



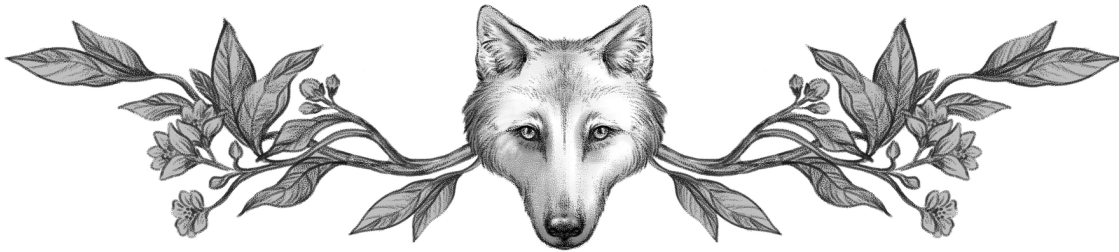
Her white hair was soft beneath my fingertips, even under the grime that coated the strands it felt like silk, a rare item in this prison. I held her with a stare. When I sensed the slightest rise in her heart rate I answered, *"You said I was pretty."*

The comment amused her. She smiled and rose to kiss my cheek, her lips teasing the shell of my ear as her hand pressed into my chest.

***"You, Rhydian Kanyk, are so much more than pretty. I fear the recipe the gods used when they made you was to my ultimate desires. I had not known you five minutes before I wanted to make you mine. Had we not had an audience, I would have devoured you on sight."***

She nipped the lobe before pushing herself away from me, her hair falling from my fingertips.

I cleared my throat and turned away before she re-joined her companions, using the motion to adjust my damn traitorous cock.



## RIEKA

The work rotation had S'vara on Bathhouse duty for the next week. So obviously I swapped my laundry shifts with her. Not because of what Farox had said, but because Eleen was the shift supervisor, and what better way to learn what kind of woman Rhydian liked than observing the woman who used to share his bed.

It wasn't entirely surprising she was his former lover. Rhydian did have a way of making you want to punch his gorgeous face in. And Eleen struck me as the type of woman who took what she wanted and didn't give a fuck who she pissed off doing it. Not the type of woman I wanted standing between me and the man who could offer me my freedom, or at least a semblance of freedom that I would find in this place. I still had to work out how to escape this train, but that was tomorrow's problem. Today I needed to learn about my competition.

I hated that word, but I wasn't naive enough to think women didn't fight over men. I'd done it plenty of times, circumstances notwithstanding to know some women fight nasty for the men they want. Love didn't even have to be a factor. There were two kinds of women in these fights. Those who love the man and those who love what he represented. I just needed to know which one Eleen was.

She didn't look pleased to see me when I turned up in the bathing carriage upon the ninth hour. Rhydian excused all the collared passengers from the work roster thirty minutes earlier, including herself, so when I arrived she assumed it was because I was lost.

"Reporting for duty," I'd said with a smile, to which Eleen simply mumbled a word to herself in her native tongue, wrote something down on the notebook she held and instructed me to join the woman at the back of the carriage.

Every time someone mentioned *The Bathhouse*, my mind would automatically wander to those back home. Private rooms with moulded ceilings and the most exquisite tiled floors, inground baths that smelled of herbs and scented oils. Kindlings who carried hot basins of water between partitions to refill your bath when it started to cool.

One giant inground pool that was a third of the size of the carriage was not what I'd expected.

I'd passed through this carriage once on the day of my arrival and I hadn't been back since.

The footbridge I remembered crossing was a direct path over the water towards the carriage exit, the wet timber beams a perfect match for the flooring of the rest of the carriage. Not dissimilar to the steam rooms in the Spa Houses of the upper district in Aronbok where the Celestial Guards were known to frequent.

I passed a young woman bathing, a child no older than three sitting on her lap. In her hand was a wooden jug, the purified water—it had a distinct smell—pouring from the spout over her giggling *collarless* child. As I walked the bridge, I passed three more young parents with *collarless* children in their arms.

My stomach churned with the memory of Ghena's words. I tried to refocus. On the Organically-made wooden pouring jugs that lined the edge of the bath, and the bristled wooden brushes that hung from racks on the timber-covered walls.

The woman Eleen had directed me to stood at the rear of the carriage pushing a giant trolley, humming to herself, her wings rippling down her back like a white cloak as she swayed. She turned

when she heard my approach, and I instantly recognised her. The teacher from Ghena's class.

She smiled when she saw me. "All Steady?"

Since every passenger we'd encountered after we'd arrived had greeted us with the phrase, I'd finally asked Hentirion for the translation before the party last night. It felt impolite not knowing what the phrase meant since I'd receive many crossed brows when I hadn't reposed.

"Steady," I replied.

The teacher cocked her head slightly as she surveyed me through dark almond eyes. Freckles danced across the bridge of her nose as her eyes widened in recognition. "You're Rieka, Rhydian's wife." As she spoke, her wings shifted out behind her, stretching wide as though she hadn't moved them in hours. I'd never heard of an Echo possessing white wings before.

"And you're the teacher from this morning," I replied.

"Oh, I'm one of many teachers. We take turns. I'm Anika." She looked me up and down and smiled as her inner voice said, **"I can see why Eleen isn't fond of you."**

It was such a matter-of-fact statement, like whatever she saw in me had confirmed whatever Eleen had said.

"Come on then." The Echo moved away from the trolley, inviting me forward. My nose picked up the contents before my eyes did, and they instantly watered. Wet, stagnant, used towels filled the basket. I waited a moment for the scent to settle, and removed my gloves to ensure they did not absorb any speck of that scent before I took hold of the frame.

"It's rough, right? All those taints mixed together. Body soup I call it." Such a casual turn of phrase.

"It's definitely not normal." It was a repellent smell, all those scents, natural, taints...body fluids. It wasn't an uncommon smell considering the amount of Blessed around, but my nose was uncommonly sensitive. Come to think of it, why was she still standing next to me?

"You're an Echo though, aren't your noses hypersensitive?"

She should be puking right about now. Every Echo I'd ever met couldn't stand being in my vicinity.

At least two feet shorter than me, she looked up at me and twitched her nose. Within seconds her nostrils appeared blocked by some kind of membranous seal. "Never met an Echo like me before have you?" she replied, her tone delighted.

I simply smiled and turned my attention to the trolley where I took note of the number of towels in the basket and those that still littered the floor along the edges of the bath. "Do we have to collect all those?"

"You sure do. Morning shift, that's you, has the wonderful job of retrieving all the night towels for laundry pick up. After that you wash out the showers, scrub down the floors, rehang all the brushes —" She continued with the verbal list of chores I was to perform until the twelfth-hour meal when I would be free for the rest of the day.

I couldn't help but stare after Anika when she left. As she walked across the footbridge, the bone tips of her wings trailing through the water in a leisurely fashion, Anika passed beneath the skylight. When the morning light hit her wings, the white leather shimmered like diamonds.

I most assuredly had never met an Echo like her.

My investigation into Eelen was less than productive. She spent the better part of an hour travelling in and out of a room at the front of the carriage. Whenever she came out she would walk over to the edge of the pool and dip her hand in the bath then make a note in the parchment notebook in her hand. And every time she removed her hand from the water, it would rise in small tendrils as though desperate to remain with her.

Eelen was a Current. A water-wielder. Which made sense. She smelled very distinctly of the ocean.

I finally managed to sneak a look in the room and only found a series of large machines that I could not fathom their purpose.

In the end, the work was more stimulating than watching Eelen. Dozens of passengers came and went over the next two hours, pulling fresh towels from the cabinets built into the walls and then

distributing them onto the floors when they were done. Left for me to collect and add to the *body soup* trolley. And after each group left, I'd mop the floors. There were some rules of courtesy though. Like rinsing off after fight training in the showers before soaking in the pool for an hour.

I'd just finished mopping after the last passengers left when a group of Runners did just that.

They arrived at the eleventh hour. Sweat clung to them, it glistened on their flushed skin like silver powder. The clothes they wore barely covered their toned bodies and no sooner had they entered the carriage, were those items distributed to the floor outside the shower room.

Amongst them was one particular person whose scent made my body do involuntary things.

A few minutes later the group emerged from the shower room, completely naked.

A tall curly-haired brunette man exited first, the same man who claimed Runners chose to stay on the train to help their families. From beside him, a petite purple-haired Sylph rose into the air, her dragonfly wings fluttering as she flew over to the far wall to retrieve a set of jugs and brushes. They were accompanied by a young man and woman who looked so alike that they had to be twins. They shared the same golden-tanned skin, black hair, and bored expressions.

Mal, the green-eyed Bear-Blessed Brute who'd defeated Eleen exited next, hand-in-hand with the most exquisite Talon I'd ever seen. Skin the colour of kharee, and possessing the most breathtaking pair of rainbow feathered wings. The smallest of the group was a dainty blonde girl who looked about my age and who had the distinct charcoal scent of a Kindling. She was engrossed in a conversation with my "husband." I tried to focus my hearing, but she gestured, much to my dismay, in the one language I did not know. Whatever had been spoken between them though, pleased her, because she began jumping up and down, gripping Rhydian's arm. Her enthusiasm led to her grabbing the purple-haired woman's

arm and dragging her into the pool, casually followed by the rest of the group.

I wasn't so far removed from the world that I couldn't admire the fine-tuning each one had done to their bodies. Thick muscles, lean muscles, each one giving the appearance they had been crafted by the gods for the purpose of combat.

It was difficult to hide the flush in my cheeks. I'd never seen this many people naked as I had seen this morning. And since my memory of that night in Keltjar was so badly fragmented, it was also the first time I was seeing *him* naked.

Deogns weren't conservative in their fashion. Our summer robes revealed enough of a person to be able to admire one's physique, but I'd only ever been permitted to see a man's body when I visited Papa at the cadet training grounds. Of course I'd seen male bodies since, but my circumstances didn't exactly allow me to be picky. Yet somehow the gods, the Eldertides, whoever it was that now influenced my life, had placed the most perfect specimen of a man in my path. The rest of him was as sublime as his ass.

*What was I thinking kicking that man out of my bed at sunrise?*

I may hate him, but damn if he wasn't attractive. Large taut muscles, thick arms, ladder abdominals and those clean-cut angles just above the band of his trousers.

*Wish I remembered sleeping with him now.*

No sooner had I consciously pried myself from admiring Rhydian in all his glory—for research purposes obviously—had Eleen found herself in the group's vicinity.

She was as attentive to Rhydian as one would expect a lover to be, an ex-lover not so much. The entire group had this odd way about them. Casual bravado mixed with nonchalant weariness. Not a single one of them went any further from the edge of the water than a few feet. It was as though they expected to have to jump out and fight someone with their bare hands. Even Eleen's body language changed around them. Mimicked theirs.

Perhaps attacks were not a rare occurrence.

Rhydian's companions were the first to notice my drawn attention. The curly-haired man must have said something to him, the two

holding a conversation before his attention had diverted to myself at the rear end of the bath. He began to saunter his way through the water, and right before he reached the ledge, the bastard submerged himself beneath the surface before climbing out.

*The fucking nerve of the man.*

The water cascaded down his body in glistening trails, the muscles in his arms constricting as he combed his wet hair back with his hands. Utterly on purpose, as though he expected a reaction out of me. As if he wanted one.

*Amateur.*

Naked as the day he was born, presenting me with the perfect view of what the gods had endowed him with—one of their best works if I was being honest—Rhydian strolled over to the trolley. “Last I checked, rotation had you on laundry duty?”

Entirely aware of the eyes that were on us, I relaxed into his presence in total opposition to the desire of the predator within me. “Checking up on me already?”

*“Lack of trust in your wife isn’t a good look,”* I said to him silently. *“Whatever would your friends think?”*

I forced another expression onto my face, one that I had no doubt would be interpreted as my being happy to see the Bloodhound. I casually trailed my hand to his forearm, “You missed me, didn’t you?” The enamoured tone with which I spoke was sickening. It didn’t faze him, unfortunately.

***“Oh we’re playing that game now, are we?”*** His inner voice was amused. ***“Well if you’ll permit me, wife, a display of affection is in order.”***

His hand wrapped around my waist and he pulled me, causing my body to collide with his.

My response was not my own, instinct born of blood kicked in and made my body rigid.

The scent of fear, sweet to the apex predator inside me filled my senses. But it was not my own. Rhydian’s ocean-blue eyes had grown round with caution, a question imperceptibly appearing within them.

*No. I will not let this man think I fear him.*



So I kissed him because it meant nothing to me.

His body settled into mine like butter, moulded into it like dough as his hands pressed into the curve of my back, my own reaching into his damp hair to hold him in place. If Rhydian was intent on having an audience, I was going to make it worthwhile.

His hands never moved from my back, but I let mine roam. The hand that wasn't caught up in his hair, perused the muscles of his back where I let it linger just above where I had seen those dimples below his spine. For a split second, his scent changed, a spike of earnest desire and I smiled into the kiss.

As much as I would have liked to insult the man for his technique, I couldn't. His mouth was delicious. Which was as infuriating as it was pleasing. But at least this aspect of my plan would be pleasurable.

**"Enjoying yourself?"** his voice cut in.

*"Not as much as you it seems."* I could feel his erection pressing into my stomach. I moved my hips in an effort to rub against it.

**"Natural reflex."** He altered the pattern of the kiss by sticking his tongue in my mouth. Compliance was mandatory at this stage of commitment. As one former lover had called it, I proceeded with the *dance of tongues*.

**"Punishing Eelen for annihilating you in the ring won't do you any favours if she's part of your plan to endear yourself to me."**

*"Whatever made you think I wanted to punish Eelen for the fight?"*

**"What exactly is it that you're doing here then, if not annoying her with your presence?"** He deepened the kiss enough that I was forced to catch my breath, so in retaliation, I slid my hand down to the flesh of his bare ass and squeezed.

*"Scoping out the competition, of course."*

**"Didn't I make that clear last night? I've never given my heart to anyone,"** his inner voice purred.

That made things easier for me then.

Taking my time, I withdrew my lips from his. I was shamelessly slow, keeping his lower lip between my teeth just long enough to

catch that scent once again change to earnest desire, and then I released it.

*"Then I'm done here."*

I heard the liquid ripple before he did, pulling away just in time to see Rhydian get saturated by the small wave that left the pool of its own volition.

I tried to hide my smile as Rhydian frustratingly combed his blond hair from his face once again. He turned to Eelen, seeking an explanation. The woman barely shrugged her shoulders. "Slip of the hand. Honestly."

"Come on Rhydian. Let your wife work," that curly-haired brunette male shouted from across the carriage, the purple-haired Slyph draped over him like he was her personal chaise.

That Talon with the rainbow wings smirked. "You wouldn't want the others to think she's getting special treatment, would you?"

"She *is* getting special treatment," the purple-haired Slyph said bluntly, and not at all under her breath. Judging by the smile of approval she sent my way, she appeared to have enjoyed the entire display.

With a curt smile to Eelen, Rhydian returned his attention to me and after a split-second moment of hesitation he took my hand. From beneath long lashes, he gazed up at me as he brought my hand to his lips. Softly and slowly, he kissed the rises of my knuckles. The time it took from one knuckle to the next felt intentionally long.

"Don't forget about our one-on-one training later," he said when he finally pulled away. The fact my hand was still held in his was likely another conscious move on his part. As was the choice to speak it aloud. So it would be heard.

*"You were serious about that?"*

***"Deathly serious. Think of it as condition number two. Revocable upon you being able to defend yourself against Eelen in a hand-to-hand fight."***

*"Now who is punishing who, Rhydian?"*

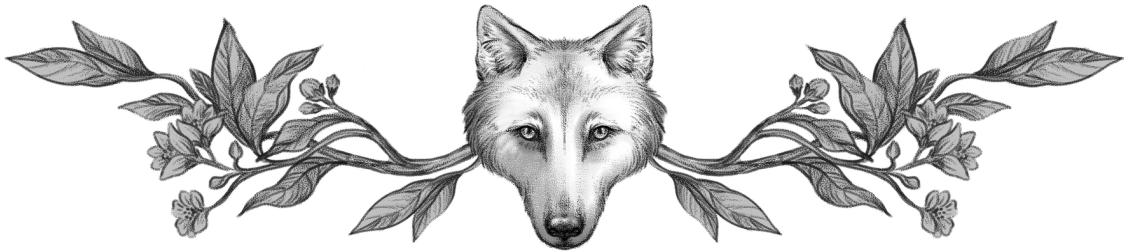
"How could I forget," I said aloud, forcing a smile onto my face. "When did you say it was again?"

He gave my hand another kiss, a chaste one. "Tonight, on the twenty-second hour." The smile he departed with was positively self-aware.

*Bastard!*

Of course he planned for our one-on-one classes to be at night. What better way to avoid sleeping with me than by making sure I'd be too tired to even attempt anything. I'd mistaken my competition.

I should have been looking at the slave trader in the red leather jacket instead.



## RIEKA

I'd spent the rest of the day in my bunk going over how I was going to survive the training session tonight. I'd done the same thing over twelfth-hour meals, occasionally pausing my thoughts to listen to my companions' musings over my "husband's" speech and what The Hunt was.

It didn't seem to be a topic anyone was willing to discuss with us.

I'd intended on returning to my bunk to sleep, believing that it would be in my best interest to be fresh for whatever physical torture Rhydan intended to inflict on me tonight. However, upon my return to our bunks, I found a roll of freshly washed blankets. As mine was the only bed with the roll, it wasn't hard to guess who had provided them.

There was another note on my pillow.

*SLEEP UNDER THESE INSTEAD OF YOUR COAT. SEND IT TO THE LAUNDRY. IT SMELLS.*

I was tempted to write back and say if he couldn't stand my smell then he was welcome to sleep on the floor. But since we were

supposed to be in that newlywed stage, I didn't. I climbed into my bunk, closed the partition off to the prison world beyond, and slept.

It was the presence of a very petite and very pregnant collarless woman standing outside my bunk that awoke me, the partition open.

And the blankets which I had refused to use were draped over me. Familiar scents lingered in the bunks, but only one was fresh.

Earth and pine needles.

I threw off the blanket as I climbed out.

"Hi, Rieka," the woman said, her voice quite cheery for such a dreary place. "I'm Lily. Thought I'd come and get you in case you got lost on your way to *The Kitchen*."

In my half-confused and sleep-deprived state, this Lily, who had the distinct scent of lemons and barley, informed me that due to my unsanctioned change in work roster, it had fallen upon S'vara and myself to fill the empty positions in *The Kitchen* rotation. For the foreseeable future, we were Lily's assistants during the dinner shift.

I had concluded during the walk that this was Eleen's retribution for the display in *The Bathhouse*. Perhaps out of jealousy, though I had yet to smell anything on her other than annoyance.

Luckily, I was quite fond of working in kitchens. S'vara on the other hand spewed off a chain of remotely sounding Torvian curse words during our walk to *The Kitchen*. It was safe to say she thought kitchen duty was worse than laundry.

Lily gave a quick tour of the industrial-style kitchen. A series of ovens ran along the right wall with stoves to the left the metal sheen that came with new kitchens long since vanished. Down the centre were pairs of benches, and within those were more pots, pans, and crockery than I think even the inn owned. Lily set us to work immediately. We were to cook the dinner the previous shift had prepped.

S'vara on the other hand stared blankly at the stove top, her dark complexion blanching. "I rig ships not boil stews. I'm going to burn this kitchen down, just you watch."

Lily simply chuckled at her and showed her the safest way to turn on the stove.

Logistically with the number of passengers on the train, we'd never cook the food on time. But as Lily so graciously informed us, whilst we were not worthy of freedom, The Venerable council, the military leadership of Kensilla, still thought it necessary to provide us sustenance. *The Kitchen's* dry storage room was stacked with hundreds of ready-made meals that reminded me of the military ration packs that my father used to bring home. They simply required heating. Regular supply drops provided the weekly meals required for all the collared passenger's nutritional needs.

*How kind of them.*

That didn't account for the fresh goods and dried meat I'd noticed in the dry store though. It also didn't account for the frozen fish and game I'd seen in the cold store. So whilst Lily stirred one of the three barrel-sized pots of beef stew on the stove, I asked her.

"*The Greenhouse* helps a lot with the fresh crops. And what we can't grow on our own, the Runners bring back. Their runs help us stretch the supplies." She dipped a spoon into S'vara's pot to taste.

So that was what Rhydian and his friends did when they weren't training or *running* in these so-called Hunts everyone refused to talk with us about. They went in search of supplies. And from what Lily informed us, the supplies only came weekly and were only ever enough for the collared passengers. This meant of the two thousand passengers on the train, over five hundred had to rely on the Runners' efforts, including two hundred children. When I asked where we stopped to retrieve the supplies her response was as I'd expected.

"The train never stops. Except for the Hunts." I knew this to be the case, but the fact Kensilla didn't even allow for the train to stop for supplies made me hate them even more than I already did.

Delivering shipments of goods onto a moving train didn't exactly seem feasible. I mulled on the practicality of how such a process might work, unable to see any way in which the goods weren't lost or someone wasn't harmed.

"I noticed sugar but no flour," I said an hour later when my curiosity got the better of me. "Does no one make bread here?"

Lily smiled at my question. "My brother did mention you were a baker."

That caught me off guard. "Your brother?"

*Please say someone else, anyone else.*

"Rhydian didn't tell you he had a sister, did he?"

I shook my head apologetically. But just as my pity began to rise so did my apprehension. If this woman was indeed Rhydian's sister, then there was every chance that she too was a Hemopath. Even with one human parent, blessings are widely known to be inherited.

Rhydian hadn't had a scent that told me he was a Bloodhound, and as far as I could tell, neither did Lily, but that didn't mean she wasn't. But if I was correct, she would be in just as much danger as Rhydian. It was one thing to use the old man against Rhydian, an idea that I hadn't contemplated simply because of his status, but using the pregnant sister? The idea turned my stomach, and I hated myself for even contemplating it, but the man intended on selling me to someone who wanted me as a leashed dog.

*"You're nothing like him, Lily."*

"Really? Everyone's always said we could be twins," Lily replied believing I had spoken aloud.

*Fuck!*

I'd said the words as a silent prayer to the world not in the least intending for her to hear me. *Damn him.* Four days and already he'd unsettled me. I've never been this careless with my thoughts before.

From her little corner of *The Kitchen* where she'd been tasked with polishing the utensils, a job which held as little stress for her as possible, S'vara asked if it was true I'd cooked a pie for Rhydian the first day we'd met.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Farox. So is it true, that you baked him a pie when you first met?" S'vara asked again.

I stirred the stew. "I didn't bake it for *him* if that's the gossip."

"It isn't," Lily confirmed.

"I gave him a slice on the house." A single brow of his sister's rose, perhaps in disbelief, so I added, "For gentlemanly behaviour."

S'vara mumbled something to herself about missing her mother's fruit pie which garnered a sad smile from Lily.

And as though I hadn't been surprised enough today, Lily said that she could put in a request to the council for the Runners to allocate a portion of the supplies to obtaining baking goods. It was still food that could be provided to the train's residents. She couldn't see why they wouldn't allow the train the small indulgence of baked goods perhaps once a month. They'd never had a baker on board before, and if Rieka was willing to...

"I am." Every cell in my body was willing. It was a far healthier use of my time than every other thought that had gone through my head in the last four days.

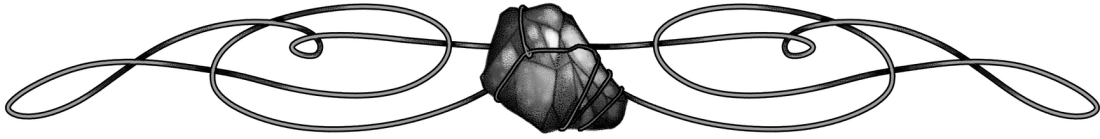
"Is it true that the pie was strawberry?" I found Lily's question odd. I confirmed as much as we lifted the first pot off the stove. The result of my answer had a soft knowing smile rise to Lily's fine features. A smile entirely to herself. When I asked her why it amused her to know that fact, her response astounded me.

"Truly?"

"True."

It appeared I was already winning this bet before I had even made it. Rhydian hated strawberries, yet not a crumb was left on that plate that night in Keltjar.





## RHYDIAN

Rieka arrived exactly a minute before the twenty-second hour with a smile on her face. It was unsettling.

"You've been happy all evening," I said as I invited her to the mat. The carriage was empty this time of night. Most sparing was done during the day so I knew we would have privacy regardless of which method of conversation we used.

"Can't I be pleased to see my husband?" Rieka halted just in front of me, her chin no higher than the middle of my chest. That steady heartbeat was such a contradiction to the storm raging in those grey eyes, just as angry as that day in the camp and just as earth-shattering as that night in Keltjar. She had no intention of making this easy for me.

"Right now Rieka, I am not your husband; I am your trainer." I stepped back, crossing my arms over my chest.

She threw up her hands in a mocking form of submission. "Certainly. And what does my trainer require of me?"

I considered her appearance. The white strands were tied back in a thick braid that ran the length of her spine. A clear vulnerability. One hard yank by the enemy and she'll be on her knees. She was still wearing the same clothes she'd had on that day in the woods,

the shawl she insisted on using as a blanket wrapped around her chest. I pointed to them. "Take them off."

Her brows rose.

"I meant, take off all the excess. I need to see how your body works unencumbered."

She unfasted the shawl at her back and dropped it to the floor. Then did the same for her buckskin vest and blouse. The singlet she wore underneath was paper thin. No wonder she was cold at night. But for training purposes, it would suffice. If I can keep my eyes off her tits long enough to instruct her.

*It is not like you haven't seen them before!* I swallowed hard, dragging my eyes from her chest to her face where she greeted me with the most self-assured smile, as if to say, *"I know what you were thinking."*

She lowered her hand to her waistband. "Trousers too, or do I get to keep those on?"

"Just get on the mat."

She obliged me, refastening her gloves as she moved into the space in front of me, pulling it up just so it covered the black tattoo on her wrist.

"Why do you wear those all the time?"

Her gaze shifted between myself and the exit as if she were afraid someone might hear.

"You and I both know there's no one in earshot," I told her.

She fidgeted with the fabric. "Would you believe me if I said I can't bear to look at it?"

"The mark of The Celestial." I thought back to the times I'd seen it. "The seven black dots represent the seven-star constellation of the raven. That's the—"

Her hand slammed over my mouth, snuffing out the words.

**"DON'T SAY HIS NAME!"** her inner voice shouted desperately as her other begged aloud. "Don't even think it!"

*"Why not?"*

Rieka whipped her hand away from my mouth, a look of outrage on her face.

Her answer was pure condemnation, the words snapped out in utter disbelief. "In name I take thee, unto myself I accept your divine mercy. Your name shall follow me wherever I go. Should I call on you in times of need, you shall know where I be, my thoughts are yours. The Prayer of the Celestials. Page one of **The Tales of the Nine.**"

She believed they could hear her when she spoke their names. I'd heard such things before. New passengers from Deos or Kensilla who believed as she did, but who soon lost their faith when they came to realise their gods had abandoned them. Rieka was the opposite. It was as though she feared they wouldn't abandon her.

"Why don't you get it removed? We have Skin Weavers on board. They could do it."

*Yes, because she wants your help after you forced her into a marriage she didn't want.*

"Are we going to train or not Rhydian, because I'm happy to return to my bed," she said pointedly. I took that as her signal the topic of conversation was over.

The stances I taught her were simple, each one designed for a different type of opponent. Unfortunately, each time she attempted them, I was forced to reposition her limbs for her when it was evident she had no idea what to do with her body, or how to move it. I suspected she did some of it on purpose, so I would have to make skin-to-skin contact with her. Brutes were a much more tactile group by nature. A part of her plan to seduce me no doubt.

I then tried getting her to memorize the most basic of movements. A punch, a block, a duck. All from a stationary standing position. I'd had to move her thumb so she wouldn't break it when she punched. Had to show her how to watch to know when to duck, and how to use her arm to block a strike so she wouldn't snap a wrist. And still, after two hours, nothing had changed. She was just as ill-equipped as when we started.

An uncharacteristic groan escaped me. "All that is steady, Rieka! Do you want to die?"

"Not particularly no." She picked at the edge of her glove.

"Then why would you half-ass this? I'm trying to keep you alive."

**"Selfishly,"** she reminded me, gazing up with a bored expression.

I wouldn't dignify that with an answer. She needed to take this seriously. "We can do this the hard way but you won't like it, Rieka."

"And what exactly is the hard way, Rhydian." She made sure I heard the contempt in her voice as she spoke my name. "Please do enlighten me."

I took up a position about five feet away and faced her. *"If you wish it."*

My senses opened to the room, to the drops of blood splattered across the floor that told me all I needed to know about their origin, to the heartbeats of those in *The Commons* still drinking at the bar, to the stench of death that lingered in *MedCom*, and to the heartbeat of a most contradictory she-wolf.

I waited three beats until my own heart had synced with hers. Beating as one. Then I moved my hand.

Rieka's own mirrored the movement and her eyes went wide.

I took a step forward and her body mimicked my own, her features shuddering in shock.

"You thought I was playing a game when I asked you to train. I wasn't." I knew instinctively that if it weren't for my own heart, hers would be in a panic at that moment.

"Death is not a possibility here. It is an inevitability." I took another step forward and she followed. "Just like the sun rises in the west and sets in the east."

"Rhydian," Rieka warned, her voice cold as I made her take another step.

"If you do not learn to fight, you will die." I took another step. "If you cannot hold your own against a human opponent, how will you ever stand against a Tainted one, who will have no qualms about ripping you open?"

Another step.

"Drowning you with the fluid in your lungs."

Another step.

"Ripping the air from them." And another step

"Even the most basic skills have saved people from certain death and you refuse to learn even those." Another step and those grey

pools turned thunderous.

"If you intend on acting like the damsel, I will be forced to protect you the only way I know how." I stopped inches from her, my breath blowing at the silken strands caressing her brow.

"And you wouldn't even know when I was doing it if I didn't want you to." I reached for that part inside Rieka, that invisible thread in my mind that led me to where I wanted and I created the blockage in hers—in the place Sal's books called a synaptic junction, and I puppeteered Rieka, her expression vanishing to one void of all emotion.

I made her reach for the dagger she kept hidden in the sheath of her boot. I made her walk towards me, and then as I lifted my hand to her chin, she in turn wielded the dagger to mine.

As I removed the blockage, an act which took no more than half a second, the haze that had filled her eyes fled and her pupils grew round in surprise. They darted between my eyes and the weapon at my throat. An almost imperceptible change flittered across her eyes and I knew what thought had crossed her mind. What she would have done in that split second had I not been in control of her.

I dropped my hand. Hers remained. "Rieka, I cannot lose you." *I will not lose her.* "Is that clear?"

The look vanished. "Yes. Now let. Me. Go."

An inhale, an exhale. And one heartbeat became two and I instantly winced as she pushed upward on the dagger.

Letting her brandish that weapon had been a risk, but I needed her to trust my actions if she refused to trust my words.

I'd never seen eyes so raw, so hurt as Rieka's were in that moment. Dark shadows lingering like wraiths clouded the grey, muddying it. "You will never do that to me again." She pressed it in ever so slightly that I doubt even she knew she drew blood. On a scale this minuscule, only a Hemopath could detect it.

The storm in her eyes settled to a gale. "If you do, I will kill you."

I believed her.

"Am I understood?" For a split second, the Bright-lights caught her eyes, and they shone gold.

"I'd expect nothing less." Rieka quickly withdrew the black-handled dagger and returned it to her boot. She then retook her original position and waited for instruction.

I'd taken one step towards her when the bell tolled over the train system.

The pit in my stomach that relished these moments opened wide devouring any sense of calm I'd managed to retain in the days since I'd returned.

When the ringing stopped, I waited and counted to ten. Ten seconds. Ten seconds and Rieka would have more time. I would have more time.

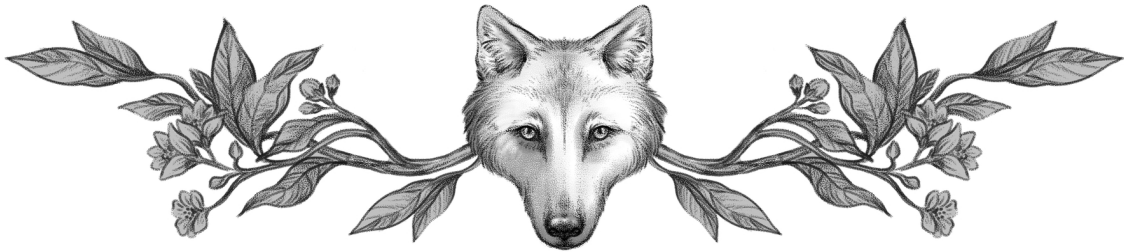
On nine her collar lit up a florescent blue.

"What does the light mean?"

I swallowed, refusing to look away from her. "You've been drawn for the Hunt." I could not hide the disappointment in my voice.

***"Rhydian, what are my chances?"***

A moment ago, I would have said near impossible, but that dagger just raised her odds. Not favourably, but I could work with shitty odds when they were no longer six feet underground.



## RIEKA

Tension scented the atmosphere like smoke. Tangy and filled with dark swirls, the aroma ticked my throat. It was the kind of scent that would have me searching for the nearest door. But the only door I could walk through led to the source of that tension.

A wave of melancholic and angry passengers had fled from the comfort of their bunks and drifted in around those luminous individuals. The blue halos were cold and confronting against the warmth of the wood and copper architecture of *The Fight Hall*.

Bile rose to my throat as the voices of my companions filled my senses with fear and terror, regurgitating things they'd heard and claimed to have been told. The wall of denial and knowing ignorance I'd carefully constructed these last few days began to crack.

Strong hands squeezed my arms and spun me around. A quickening of ocean waves filled my vision, dangerous and violent, such a contrast to the earthly calm of his scent.

"Rieka!"

I let his voice pull me from my thoughts. To claim my focus. I had to.

"Rieka, get dressed. As fast as you can. We don't have long." Rhydian turned his attention to S'vara and Tira beside me. "Help her."

He continued to speak as we pulled on the clothes I'd stripped off not even two hours ago.

"You need to find a cache supply. The Deadwood covers a fifty-mile radius and they can be anywhere within that. Avoid the high ground if you can, some Hunters have perches in the trees. They will kill you from them if they catch sight of you. The train won't circle back around for a full twenty-four hours so if you don't make it back to the train by midnight tomorrow, find shelter. If you cross paths with a Hunter, run. They will try to force you into a dead zone where they've set up Void traps to neutralise your taint. If you cross one of their camps, steal anything along the edge that will keep you alive for any amount of time. Water. Flint. A weapon. But do not enter the camp. If you cross paths with another passenger stick together. It'll save your life. And as soon as they announce commencement you run."

"But you just told me to stick with someone, if we're all together when we get off isn't that safer?"

"Rieka you run." **"I will find you in there,"** his inner voice added with the kind of assurity that was frightening.

*"What does that mean? You're coming with me?"*

He shook his head. "The Hunters have rules they have to follow, but some don't care, they will kill one another to collect the collars of their prey."

"We're prey to them?" Tira's soft voice quivered as her hands trembled on my shawl.

**"Now do you get it?"** The stoic expression he bore made him look like a marble statue, calm and unyielding.

*"What's stopping the passengers from running away?" I asked silently.*

**"The collars. Once inside the Deadwood, your collar is bound to its borders, cross it and you'll die."**

I couldn't hide my disappointment, even from my inner voice. *"Death by collar or death by Hunter, not much of a choice."*

**"They've turned a centuries-old punishment into entertainment for the masses, Rieka. What did you expect?"**



The tang of fear in him was so minute it was a single grain of salt on my tongue.

That cheery woman's voice came over the train system. "The train is arriving at Mortusilva Station. Those disembarking at Mortusilva please approach the doors. And be careful to watch your step."

Rhydian was the only one who moved with me as though some unspoken message had spread amongst the other passengers that they were not permitted to walk any further, my bunkmates included. Walking towards the doors I saw other Runners, doing just as Rhydian was, advising those with the death sentence glowing around their necks.

It was too soon. Rhydian said I'd have a week maybe more before being forced into a Hunt. I'd had four days. The only thing I'd managed to ascertain about the Hunt was the scent the passengers gave off when it was mentioned. Fear.

I stared at the door as I asked my next question. *"What if I don't make it back before the train returns?"*

He spun me around to face him, his grip firm on my arms, instantly snuffing out that scent, immersing me in another. His calm.

***"You survive. Once a Hunt begins, you can remain indefinitely, but if you're still in there when you're drawn for another Hunt, and you don't disembark at that station, the collar will kill you where you stand. So you need to survive to board the train when it returns the following night."***

Rhydian's calm was palpable. It blanketed me, a fur coat shielding me against the chill of a snowstorm. So when he finally dropped his hands from my arms, the scent of fear was a tidal wave. I was a fish swimming upriver and as a reflex, I shut it out.

The train slowed and then came to a grinding halt.

Rhydian pressed the button by the door which lit up a red-light overhead. The large roller door removed itself from its pocket in the hall wall and slid to the right.

I thought I'd been relieved to smell the forest. Taste the pine scent at the back of my throat. But instead, I found myself focusing on a wooden bench that had experienced too many storms and lost two

of its legs to root. On the dark stain that marred the stone floor. The scent of humans and leather and steel.

A station platform stood awaiting me, nature having reclaimed a portion, like a garden one might find hidden on an estate. A wild and untamed kind of secret. I couldn't look at Rhydian, couldn't look into that ocean if I couldn't keep that calm with me.

That damn woman's voice returned. "Passengers, please disembark."

As I crossed the threshold onto the platform, Rhydian spoke once more, his words making my chest tighten.

***"Do not die Rieka."***

*"I never make promises I can't keep."* I heard the door slide closed behind me.

One hundred heartbeats filled the station to my left and right. Amongst them, I recognised some faces I'd seen in the mess hall. It should have unsettled me more.

The same woman from the train spoke through the station system. "Welcome to Mortusilva Station." There was a long pause when the train departed the platform taking with it my calm. I heard feet shuffling, and bodies in my periphery moving. Then someone to my left bolted for the forest.

A cacophony of bright blue lit up the air the moment the man passed beyond the edge of the station shelter. The scent of burning meat stirred my stomach as we were forced to watch as his body was cooked by the leash around his neck as he was electrocuted to death. The collar went dead when his heart stopped, the nanotech liquifying as it dripped from his melted flesh and reformed on the station floor where his body now lay.

Spark-Tech. Our collars were made using Sparks.

The crackle of the speaker sent me still, and the woman spoke once more. "Commence!"

Chaos erupted as the word was spoken. Heavy footfalls sounded as passengers who could, ran. Those that didn't, flew or ducked as a flurry of arrows shot out of the forest. Screams of pain echoed off the station roof as the wounded collapsed, and the dead slinked back and over the edge down on the tracks.

I attempted to launch myself down across the stonework floor in an attempt to play dead with the corpse, his proximity to the edge of the station a possible escape. But I'd miscalculated and had run too far left.

An arrow shot out of the dark and flew right into my left shoulder. I felt the razor-sharp metal slice the skin like butter and wedge itself between the muscles. A howl ripped through me causing every Brute in the vicinity to still. Collapsed on the cold stone floor I crawled as fast as I could to the left wall, a small alcove my only shield and I wedged myself there, legs aligned to the stone.

My fingers came away clean when I touched my back. The arrow hadn't gone all the way through.

*Fuck!*

I'd have to leave it in. I gathered a piece of my shawl and bundled it in my mouth, then took hold of the shaft with both hands, the pain making me cry out, and I snapped it.

Silence then fell on the station. The scent of death tainted the air. Back flat to the wall, I closed my eyes and listened.

Heavy breathing.

Quickened heartbeats.

Leaves crushed under feet.

Feet. Ten pairs. Ten scents.

I pushed my senses out further. Five stationary to the north. Twelve pairs running. No. Eleven pairs now.

Nine to the east. Three stationary, six running.

The clicking of a crossbow being drawn.

The thud of an axe striking wood.

The scent of blood in the air to the west, ten more heartbeats, eight running.

And a prolonged hum. I followed the sound with my eyes and found the lights of the station emitting the low sound. The Hunters had a clear view of everyone.

I searched the ground around me and when I found what I was looking for I aimed for the light fixture. I missed. I searched again and found another piece of broken stone, digging it up with my finger. The glass shattered, dispersing the luminos—the

phosphorescence produced by Brights—into a dazzling mist that dissipated into nothing.

Another bulb shattered a few meters away. Then a few seconds later the one next to it. Someone had worked out what I was doing. The Hunters were humans, which meant they couldn't see in the dark. But some of us could.

Within minutes the entire station was dark, not even the new moon shed enough light on the station to aid the Hunters. I could hear footfalls on cold earth as trepidation filled the air. I risked a peek beyond the wall that shielded me.

Five Hunters were approaching by my right.

Light caught something in my periphery and I saw the collar of the corpse. I could see the Hunters as clearly as if daylight were streaming down through the treetops. They would not be able to see me, not this close to the wall. I reached out and grabbed the collar.

It felt even more inconspicuous in my hands as if it were some sculpture that might sit on a mantelpiece and not around a throat. I didn't know what compelled me to store it in the inner folds of my shawl, wedged close against my chest, but I did it.

The footfalls touched stone and the Hunters climbed the stairs of the station platform. The nearest was no more than four feet away, crouching down to examine the corpse for the very thing I had just taken. A helmet and mask covered their head, body armour of a fibrous nature covering them all in black. He smelled of equal parts excitement and joy. Not an ounce of fear.

The scent of honeyed toast drew my sight upward and as the Hunter stood, a lithe figure emerged from the darkness of the roof awnings and dropped on the Hunter, brandishing two arrows. The figure plunged them into the vulnerable gaps between the Hunter's neck armour.

Everything that happened felt as if a god had slowed time. The killer reached down for the Hunter's weapon, a black metal cylinder with a cross-bow trigger and aimed it at the chest of the second Hunter who had turned around to aim a similar weapon. They missed because the killer was faster, striking them in the chest and proceeding to take that weapon as well. The other passengers took

this as their opportunity and struck. Several growls echoed off the roof along with gurgled screams. I didn't wait to see who had won those fights. I crawled along the station floor, and when I reached the stairs, I ran.

I hadn't run in so long. The part of me that craved it like a fish craved water screamed at me to go faster. Begging me not to stop.

My legs ached; my lungs burned. But they were the good pain, the pain that told me I was still alive. I ran until the only heartbeat I could hear was my own.

Somewhere between a hill and a gully, the caw of a raven pierced the night.

My body bolted to an instant stop. Through slow breaths, I searched my surroundings for the creature hoping it had been an adrenaline-induced delusion.

It was perched atop the splayed roots of an uprooted carriage-sized tree trunk.

The raven cawed again, my body retreating at that familiar sound.

It cawed once more before shooting off into the night air. Seconds later the wind pawed at my cheek, and I smelled humans.

I took shelter in the roots as their approach sounded in the night. Two of them. One from the east and one the south, their scents getting closer with every step, until one of them, dressed identically to the Hunters from the station, stood no more than ten feet from the trunk.

A single gaakriik, a harmless spell surfaced. One that would cause no harm to anyone except me if it went wrong. One to hide me in plain sight.

I let the word slip, spoken so softly it could have been mistaken for a breeze.

"Arkagaffai."

The rush was frightfully familiar. The way I could feel my blood pumping in my veins. How I could hear the bugs crawling in the soil beneath my feet, the leaves stretching for growth in the tree tops. How for one split second, I felt everything. And then it was gone. Whilst the rush had vanished, I could still feel my hold on the spell in the back of my mind where it would remain until I released it.

And just in time for the second Hunter to emerge from right on top of me. He jumped from the trunk above me onto the forest floor with terrifying ease, right in front of me causing my breath to catch in my throat.

On their back were two axes, fresh blood on the blades.

Both Hunters strolled towards one another conversing in Kensillan. They appeared to agree on something, the taller one with the axes pointing back in the direction the other had come, away from me. The smaller nodded and walked past the other Hunter.

When there was at least ten feet between them, the Hunter pulled an axe from his back and threw it. The weapon embedded itself in the helmet of the other Hunter. Their body went limp and collapsed to the ground in the same moment I let a gasp slip.

The axeman came to a standstill. Slowly he turned, head inclined towards me. After a moment of contemplation, he approached the downed tree stopping a mere foot from where I was lying.

Staring right at me. Or rather through me. The Hunter could not see me.

I held my breath.

Five seconds went by.

Ten seconds and he turned on his heel, never having seen me at all. I didn't take another breath until the axeman had removed his weapon from the other's helmet and he'd disappeared into the tree line.

I didn't know what I would find when I looked upon myself, never having bespelled myself before, nor had I ever spoken that word. I had to stifle my shock. Every inch of my skin was covered in bark and moss, right down to my feet, and when I placed my hand against the tree trunk, there was no discerning it from my hand.

A heartbeat thumped one hundred meters to the north, and it was converging on me.

I immediately released my hold on the spell and ran until I caught the scent of more Hunters, hid then ran again. I kept my senses alert seeking signs of anything that smelled or sounded out of place. I was fine with this for the most part, except when I needed water. I sought out its scent and found a stream but realised just in time the

tang of death drop flowers. Someone poisoned the water upstream. I found the body of a passenger who hadn't figured it out in time further downstream. So not only did I not have any water to drink but I also couldn't use it to clean out my wound. At least the injury wasn't worse, and I'd had worse. This pain was bearable.

I kept running. Not because I needed to but because it kept me warm. Because a certain someone told me to dress appropriately for fight training. All I had for insulation was my wrap, so I retied it to shield my head from the majority of the cold night air, but with no fire and still no sign of a supply cache, the idea I might be stuck here for another day was fast becoming my reality.

A figure I hadn't scented passed through the woods ahead of me and my body stilled as a wolf emerged from between the trees.

My body immediately went into the crouch position as I readied myself to confront it.

But it suddenly stopped and turned to look at me.

A large grey with a small white patch on its side. A gorge formed in my chest, ripped open by the sight of that wolf.

*Tiny!*

I took a step closer and he disappeared.

Shocked into immobility, I could feel the biting cold of the forest air, as though I was standing on the balcony of my room back in Keltjar completely naked.

My teeth began to chatter.

A rustling of leaves snapped my attention to my left and I saw him again. Running.

*Tiny? Wait?* He's supposed to be dead.

I chased after him, the chill of the air refusing to leave me, slicing at my face like a cutthroat. Tiny appeared and disappeared through the trees as I pursued him.

Then he vanished.

There was no trace of him, of his smell, of his coat.

My spectrals dissipated into nothing as if there was no one there to receive them. I wrapped my arms around my quivering body.

Nothing. No response.

Another noise, a hollow whistle sounded behind me and I spun around in haste to find myself standing before the mouth of a cave.

*Tiny?* I called out on my approach.

The scent of a pack long since fled was all that lingered in the dark tunnels. I'd slept in dens before, I could do it again. My eyes soon adjusted to the darkness, but my body continued to shiver.

In the dark, the true dark, nothing lingered but thoughts. Thoughts that bounced off walls and sung poems of wishes denied. They thought this moment prudent to emerge.

**"The loss of my wings—"** I stopped at the sound of that voice.

**"The pain is unimaginable."**

*Mother?*

Her refined figure walked across the opening of a passageway. My feet were drawn to her, to her warmth.

**"Pierced through the heart by my own daughter's hand."**

A figure stood at the end of another passage, this one with dark curls and brandishing a wooden Kasik in play with a young cadet.

*Papa?*

Mischievous giggles flittered down the tunnel. A child dashed past me with a lantern outstretched, the luminous bouncing off the silver ring of symbols carved into the wall of the cave.

A parade of figures in white veils sang a hymn of solemnity as they walked through one wall and into the other.

*"Rieka?"*

I collapsed, my body forsaking me at the sound of that voice.

"Rieka!" Firm hands found raw skin. I cried out as the contact sent pain ripping down my arm.

Golden hair and sunlit eyes. *"You're here?"*

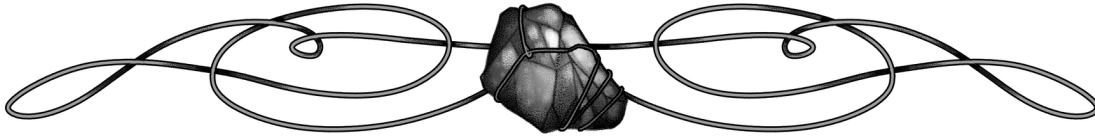
*You can't be here.* Not here. Please no. I reached for his face. He was still as beautiful as the last time I saw him.

*"Shit. You're burning up."*

What? Burning. *"Nothing's burning."* "The world is too cold to burn."

My vision faded as winter settled into the cave. The last thing I heard was my longest love speaking the words, "This is the second time you've done this to me."





## RHYDIAN

Rieka's fever broke a few hours after dawn. The arrow wedged in the muscle of her shoulder had been serrated, designed specifically to stop once it caught muscle where the poison it had been tipped with would work its way into the person's system. A slow death or an easy kill. The choice stood with the Hunter.

It shouldn't have happened so fast but from the way I'd been tracking her through the woods, Rieka sped up the flow of the poison with her erratic running, flooding the poison through her system.

It had been dread that sent me running when I'd sensed her suddenly slow. When I'd found her in the cave I'd thought, "Good. She listened to me." I hadn't expected to find her feverish, her pupils blown, sweat dripping off her face and her blood poisoned. I never thought I would have been thankful to a god, but there must have been one watching over her. The poison coursing through her blood was Aridican, a plant only native to Kensilla and the poison of choice for Kensillan Purists. If it had been Drake venom I'd be burying her in a shallow grave.

I found the Callow Moss for the antidote at the base of a tree a few hundred meters from the cave mouth. If I hadn't run these woods a hundred times before, Rieka would likely have died by

morning. Aridican was a nasty slow working poison that if left untreated would have led to violent bouts of self-inflicted injury brought on by paranoia and hallucinations hours before the fever ever hit. Rieka's habit of running away saved her life.

I'd pulled her coat from my rucksack and draped it over her in the night before activating the Kindling Orb. Apexes like Rieka could normally regulate their body temperature in this climate but in her state, it was not possible. But the tech device seemed to do the job. She curled up right next to it and didn't wake until the soup was ready.

"Rhydian?" She looked around the cave as though she expected to see someone else.

Easing into a sitting position, wincing when she put weight on her left arm she asked, "How are you here?"

I handed her a cup of the soup, the hare and root vegetables smell enough to cause my stomach to grumble. "Careful. I had to cut it open to get the arrowhead out. You'll need to let Sal look at you when we get back." I hadn't often found a need to stitch a wound closed.

"If we get back." Rieka put the cup rim to her lip and drank as she stared at a space on the opposite wall.

I scooped out a cup for myself and did the same.

Halfway through her third sip she suddenly stopped and hastily began examining her body, rustling in that wrap around her chest. "To your left," I said indicating to the collar I removed from it when I'd tended to her wound. She said nothing as to how she procured it. I was surprised to see her in possession of one at all. The Hunters made a game of it—the more collars one took from the "game" the bigger the prizes they would be awarded back in Aredyn, the Kensillan capital.

I wasn't entirely sure why she took it. Maybe Rieka intended to use it on me, though that would entirely defeat the purpose of my trying to keep her alive, and she knew that now.

Rieka retied her wrap, tucking the collar inside against her chest and finished her soup in silence before she spoke again. "You didn't answer my question, how are you here? I must have run ten miles in

the night, and last I checked Bloodhounds need blood to track someone."

I leaned back against the cave wall, scooting my feet closer to the Orb to warm the soles. "The blade in your boot. You nicked me earlier."

A frown that looked more appealing than it should have emerged on her sharp features. I looked away as she shifted to reach into her boot.

She put the tip of the blade to her nose. "Homeopaths can scent that small a drop?"

"Sense, not scent." I didn't know why I corrected her. I took another mouthful of soup and swallowed thickly.

"And you tracked me through the forest just like that?"

"Well, I couldn't very well ask for a drop of blood right there in the hall, could I? That would defeat the purpose of this little arrangement wouldn't it," I replied flatly.

"Says the man who used his taint to demonstrate his death-sentence-worthy-power in a public place." She looked at me with such disdain, that I half expected her to spit in my face.

"If that's what you got from that conversation, then feel free to walk out of the cave. I was obviously exaggerating the Hunts."

Rieka refrained from commenting.

She pouted, eyes forming slits, mouth pursed, arms crossed over her chest as she lay back down on the floor in fuming silence. This day was going to be long.

An hour had passed, neither one of us speaking to the other when Rieka stood and walked past me to reach the end of the tunnel.

"Going somewhere?"

"To relieve myself." Slowly, she looked at me over her shoulder and added, "Unless you would like me to do it here if that's your thing. I don't judge. To each their own."

And I thought nothing could surprise me.

When she came back, instead of returning to her place by the Orb, as though she had done it a thousand times before, Rieka slid down the wall taking up a position beside me, her body pressed up against mine. Then quite casually, she removed my hand from my pocket,

held it in hers, then stuck them both back in my jacket and snuggled into me.

"Can I help you?" I asked, trying to ignore the way my body reacted to her presence.

She rested her weight on my arm. "Bodies get warmer faster when they're skin to skin." She was playing that game now?

"That usually only counts when both parties are naked."

She shifted to rest her chin against my shoulder, her brows raised suggestively. "Do you want to strip or should I?"

*"Damn it woman!"*

"You know I heard that."

How could she be so infuriating with so few words? I took a deep breath, reached into my pocket with my free hand and pried her from it. "We've no audience here Rieka. There's no need for the show of affection."

Leaning in until her face was inches from mine, her voice even more suggestive than those grey storms were, she professed, "Well if that's what you got from our little conversation then you weren't listening. Everything I do is for your benefit Rhydian, from the moment we kissed."

Those grey eyes drifted to my lips, her expression one of longing and she purred, "My life is yours, Rhydian." It was a false longing, but she was very good at it.

"Aren't I blessed." Slowly, I too moved towards Rieka, letting my body's urge to feel her against me again take over. A controlled decision. She didn't startle, but I didn't expect her to. I let my eyes drift down to her mouth, my gaze caressing the fine lines of the curve of her lips. She leaned in closer and I lifted my hand to her cheek. When I was certain the fear I'd witnessed in *The Bathhouse* would not surface in her, I gently grazed my thumb over the flesh of those two supple lips.

"Does this work on all men," I said, my voice low and breathy, "this fawning and self-righteous honesty because it's doing wonders for my ego."

The longing in her eyes died and she sat rigidly upright as she swatted my hand away. "I frankly haven't been this confident in

myself for..." I paused to drag out that fuming expression clawing at her face. "A month."

Rieka scowled a blank sort of nonchalance as she stood from beside me and returned to her original position by the orb.

"No please, don't go." My tone remained flat as I continued to mock her. "Come back."

She clomped down, laid on her back and rolled over providing me with a lovely view of her curves.

"I miss you." I probably should have stopped at the "come back" but her expressions were just too delicious.

Rieka was definitely a wolf. She couldn't settle in one place. For thirty minutes she shifted to several positions around the Kindling Orb until she finally settled on a spot directly opposite me along the cave wall.

She spoke again while examining her clothes making a mental count of what needed mending—there were several tears in her shirt sleeves and a rather jagged one caused by the arrow.

"Why were you in Keltjar?" she asked, her gaze on the fabric of her pants where the knee had torn.

Admitting I'd been sent there to acquire her for the buyer was probably not going to improve our situation, especially since I mistook her friend for her. A white-haired, pale-eyed Brute was all the parameters I'd been given, that and to be wary of her temper. Krisenya Tenamai fit all those requirements and Rieka had not. She had seemed every bit human when we'd met. I had found her closeness to the Kanahari in that mountain village unusual, but they had a fondness for her that I hadn't seen before. For all I knew her colour-blanced hair could have been due to sharing that heritage. As a culture, they weren't inclined to share much of it with outsiders, yet Rieka hunted with one regularly and drank with the other. In truth, her friend being a Terrestrial had cemented my choice. But I couldn't tell her all that.

"The buyer wanted a white-haired pale-eyed Brute, I got them one. When they found out about you being on the train, they wanted you." Even I knew she couldn't detect a lie in that statement.

"But why Keltjar, you could have gone to any number of villages in The Hetra, why Keltjar, why stay at the Old Man's Hearth?" She pulled at a thread in her pants, snapping it off.

"The buyer said that's where I'd find what they wanted." Again. No lie.

"And how exactly did they know that? Kris was only staying in town because of me."

"You'll have to ask them that when you meet." I watched as her body slumped in position, a kind of physical resolve washing over her. Had she finally realised there was no way out of this for her?

"Pity" was the word that came from her lips.

Curious as to the odd answer, I asked, "Why pity?"

"Because that's never going to happen."

I could feel my brow furrow. I was perplexed. "Still so confident that you're going to win the bet, that I'm going to give up my plans and save you, choose you over everything I've worked years to accomplish."

She looked me straight in the eyes, that ever-present storm suddenly calm and said, "Yes."

I marvelled at the sheer confidence this woman had. "And where exactly does one get such confidence?"

"In a pit of yellow-eyed vipers."



Rieka was a patient woman. When I'd told her it would be safer to remain in the cave for the day and head back out into the forest come twilight, she hadn't questioned me. I'd scavenged this forest a thousand times before and if I had never seen this cave it was safe to say the Hunters didn't know about it either. So we would be safe for now.

She took to some odd form of physical movement soon after, eyes closed, her lips moving mutedly whilst her arms waved around. When I asked what she was doing her answer had been "Baking."

"Why?"

"It calms me." She then paused and opened her eyes. "Unless you want to take me up on my other suggestion." Her eyes drifted down to my crotch. Suffice it to say she continued with her imaginary baking.

Mid-afternoon, she took to taming her hair. The braid which she'd worn in *The Fight Hall* had fallen loose in the night, the long white strands matted with small twigs and brush.

Starting from the bottom, she would un-twist the thick pieces of hair, separate any individual strands caught up in the item that didn't belong—mostly brush and twigs—remove it, and then continue. She did this methodically, inch by inch for over an hour, and she wasn't at all phased by it.

I'd seen Lera cut a chunk of hair straight out of the back of her head with a knife because she couldn't have bothered to untangle the knot that was there. But Rieka combed it all by hand, the long velveteen strands falling between her fingers like threads of silk. Upon reaching the top of her head she began styling it once again, selecting portions of her hair as I'd seen my mother and Lily sometimes do and twist them over one another, over and over again. Beneath and atop another portion until she once again wore the long braid from *The Fight Hall*, the leather ribbon I'd provided her securing it all in place.

"Is a woman doing her hair that fascinating?"

I startled at being caught, which caused a slight smile to touch her face.

"Only so much as to wonder why you don't just cut it short if it is such a hassle to tend to."

She adjusted her coat around her as she answered, "Those markings on your chest, I assume they aren't just for show. Lycoan Sul tattoos are intentional if not symbolic in what they represent. You sat for ten maybe twelve hours to receive them, why bother if you were going to cover them up all the time?"

She hadn't been incorrect. I'd covered them since receiving them at nineteen, not because I was ashamed of them but because of what they represented.

My father Henric had been brought up Lycoan. He had been the one to teach me that only intimate eyes were permitted to see one's Sul, but only my Dana was permitted to touch it. It had been entirely unplanned when she'd noticed it in the inn.

I gave her my honest answer. "Because they are a part of me."

"As is my hair. Anything worth taking time to do is worth treating with res—" She froze. "Someone's outside."

I'd been so focused on Rieka, I hadn't noticed when the new heartbeat entered my senses. She shifted to a crouched position, her hand reaching for her boot.

"Wait here." Her expression said she didn't like being told what to do, but she made no move to follow me.

The cave had such an odd entrance, hidden from sight except at one specific angle, the stone cut in such an illusionary way that I'd concluded it had to be Devo-made. But which taint exactly I couldn't ascertain. I'd pass on the location to Filora when next I had the chance.

The intruder was standing at the mouth of the cave, their back to me when I approached. Kensillan Hunter's armour covered them from head to toe. Black as pitch, it made them appear as if they were part of the shadow. They stared out at the forest ahead, the afternoon sun setting the land aglow in olive and amber.

I let the phrase leave my lips, entirely prepared to kill this Hunter should I have to. "If the gods knew—"

The Hunter's swaying stopped. A moment later they responded in Seja. "We'd be dead."

Every muscle in my body relaxed at the sound of that voice. Pulling him into the cave, my friend removed his helm and mask and grinned, bright and toothy. Then immediately pulled me into a hug, as though I hadn't just seen him three days prior. "It's good to see you brother," I said as he crushed me in his embrace.

Jonah had always been the sentimental type, despite his rough and rugged exterior. "How many of us came today?" I asked as he



pulled out of the hug.

"Six." He ran a hand down his thick black beard. "Thought you weren't coming on this Hunt?"

"Something came up."

He studied me, forehead furrowed, "And that something being?"

"His wife." Jonah's eyes darted behind me to Rieka who had snuck up on both of us in the tunnel. She stood leaning against the cave wall, one arm crossed over her chest as the other played with the black-handled dagger in her hand. I'd have to add Old Preat to the list of languages this woman understood. Speaking in Seja where the majority of words were Old Preat, meant Rieka might be able to pick up more of my language than I'd expected, which meant secrecy was now even more difficult.

"He's one of the Hunters. I saw him kill another last night." Her gaze surveyed my six-foot-three friend with cautious regard.

Jonah corrected her with a smile. "I'm not technically a Hunter."

"Are you also, technically not a Bear-Blessed Tahzi," she replied just as nonchalantly. Though I doubted she felt that way, her heartbeat was on the cusp of unsteady.

Jonah took a step towards her. Rieka instantly retreated, causing him to quickly contain himself. "My apologies. Not many people in this part of the world recognise that about me. The Tahzi part. How did you?"

"Crossing through the Green Waste, they're kind of hard to miss."

Recognition suddenly dawned on Jonah's face as he surveyed Rieka. "Wife?"

"Story for another time. Did you find one?" I asked, changing the subject.

Jonah perked up a smile and quickly dashed out of the tunnel before returning with a giant sack.

"One would think they would use something more economical than a sack," Jonah pondered as he deposited Rieka's supply cache on the cave floor.

"Then it would mean they cared about our wellbeing." I ruffled through the contents. They'd been known to leave out items for their own amusement. Thankfully nothing was missing.

"What's in there?" Rieka asked as she came to inspect the item she was fighting for her life to obtain.

I wouldn't lie to her. Not about this. "A week's worth of rations."

"A week? I was nearly killed for a week's worth of rations?" Her expression hardened as she spoke.

"For you and the other new arrivals. They'll whittle it down should one of you die." There was no sugarcoating this. It wasn't a hypothetical. It was likely one or all of them would die within the season.

"Why just the week?" her eyes lit up when she pulled out a toothbrush.

"It's part of the mind games the Generals like to play. Put you in the Hunt and survive to feed your fellow passengers. Die and they don't get the food. But they normally enter newcomers in pairs, did you see any of your bunkmates back at the station?"

She hadn't which was odd. The pricks who run the Hunts always select the newcomers in the first few draws right after arrival. The earlier a newcomer enters a Hunt the more likely they are to die, and the fewer rations they have to doll out.

"Maybe they made a mistake." It was such a straightforward response I thought she was joking. She hadn't been.

"I doubt that."

Her jaw clenched. "They're only human."

Did this woman have to question everything I said? "Humans who take their orders directly from The Core." Honestly, I could tell her the sky was blue and she'd probably argue it was azure or some weird shade that women all seem to know.

Her response was as expected, if not treasonous on half the continent. "And gods can't make mistakes?"

I pulled the water skin from the bag and handed it to her. "I've never heard of one who had, have you?"

Jonah used the awkward silence to inform me that there were only two Hunters left. Someone—not one of ours—had been hunting them during the night, which had increased the passengers' chances of re-boarding the train exponentially.

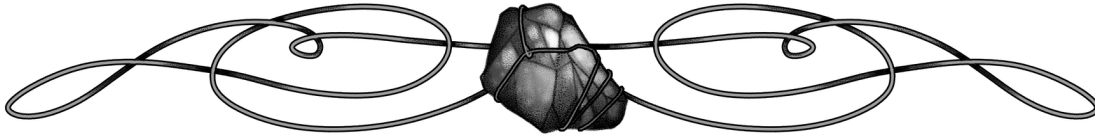
When Jonah left an hour later, I started to pack up our camp.

"We're leaving already," Rieka asked. "I thought you said to wait till twilight?"

"There are only two Hunters left. Our chances are better the closer we are to the station. Now that we have the cache as soon as we cross the station threshold, rules say they can't touch you."

And once again she had something to add. "You said the Hunters don't always follow the rules."

I picked up my sack and flung it over my shoulder, staring out into the woods as the sun began to turn the sky copper. "This rule they do."



## RHYDIAN

We passed through the forest unhindered for two hours, but the closer we got to the station the more I started to worry. What if it was someone else picking off the Hunters? It had been a year since we'd located the last Rabid in the Deadwood and given it mercy, perhaps we missed one?

Train stories claim before the rail became a prison, Mortusilva, The Deadwood was used as a hunting ground. Devolved Humans like myself who carried taints in their blood were decreed by Kensilla as The Quarry, a species who were to be culled. So whenever one of my kind crossed over Kensilla's borders they were hunted down and slaughtered. Those who survived were said to have become wild and deranged, forced to survive in the forest with only their taint for survival. Someone rabid.

They had once roamed this forest in numbers too great to count. It had taken three generations to mercy their numbers. Perhaps someone, one of the Hunters had thought it would make the Hunt more exciting, more exhilarating and entertaining to set another Rabid loose in the forest where their ability to determine friend from foe was starved and tortured from them.

I widened my senses, but I never detected the erratic beat of a Rabid's heart.

We had another thirty-minute walk uphill before we reached the station. We had just passed through the thickest part of the woods when I sensed the blood.

Instinctively, I increased the speed of my blood flow. Within moments my sight improved, adjusting to the dark. I knew this forest like the back of my hand, so traversing it at night had never been an issue, but fighting in the dark required my taint. My ears picked up nothing but the sound of insects.

*"What do you smell?"* I asked,

***"Blood. Old. Several hours. You?"***

*"The same."* I couldn't sense anyone either.

Rieka lowered the supply cache sack to the floor, the ground silent upon the motion and she began moving in the direction of the blood, drawn to it the same as me.

We walked twenty feet before we saw it. A dark pool glistened at the base of a tree, a bloody arrow, pulled from a wound, dispersed on the ground beside it. Rieka crouched down low, her nostrils flaring.

***"Injured Fabricant,"*** she told me, then adding with a tone of certainty, ***"A Spindle."*** Another thing to add to the list of things I didn't know about this woman. She may be Stilled but her sense of smell was unnaturally precise for a Brute.

Rieka followed the trail and then stopped. ***"It's fresh here."***

*"No more than an hour,"* according to my own senses.

***"She's hurt."***

The blood was spiked with adrenaline.

***"She was running when she was struck. Come on. The trail goes this way."*** Rieka indicated along the bottom of the rise.

*"It could be a trap."*

***"What if she's one of yours?"***

Rieka's eyes narrowed as she watched me dip a finger into the blood pool and bring it to my lips.

A flash of a life swam behind my eyes. A mere few seconds passed, and I knew.

*"It's Peia. She's one of Sal's girls in MedCom."*

Rieka didn't wait for another response. Feet light to the ground she proceeded along the rise following the trail. The blood got fresher the further from the hill we trekked.

***"There she is!"***

Rieka caught sight of the injured woman less than five feet away, clothes torn and bleeding from her abdomen. She was kneeling in the middle of a clearing.

Too late did I react.

The moment Rieka passed into the clearing I could no longer sense her. Peia had not existed to my senses and so when Rieka passed through the perimeter of the Void trap, nor did she.

I'd rushed to grab her hand before she crossed only to find myself lifted into the air, having sprung a trap. A net fit for a bear confined me. The braided rope workings had been entirely transmuted into Alchemist steel, unbreakable and invulnerable to human weapons. Like an animal in a snare, I hung ten feet above the forest floor and with no weapon in hand.

My shouts for Rieka to run were drowned out when a cry ripped through the air, tearing at my ears. The surety with which I knew one of my eardrums had perforated was the same with which I knew the Hunter was subjecting us to an Echo's Cry. Powerful and incredibly painful.

Rieka and Peia both curled in on themselves, hands covering their ears when the Hunter emerged from behind the injured woman. He leaned down, gripped her by the hair pulling upward and slit her throat.

I could sense nothing of the freshly strewn blood when it seeped from the dying woman's neck.

Resheathing his knife the Hunter approached Rieka, her body twisting low to the ground as she tried desperately to regain her footing. He was no less than five feet away when I saw his bare face. Cold hollow eyes. A predator. The man wore no mask. The mark of a hunter who feared nothing and one who never failed to kill his prey. I could see Rieka rise to stand, her body in a position nearly identical to one I'd just taught her, and she struck at him.

I watched the movement of his lips over the sound of the sonic cry. "Stop."

Rieka did.

I shouted at her to run away but she did not move. Could she not hear me?

Again the Hunter spoke. "Stand up." Rieka obeyed the order, sending a chill down my spine.

Other than my own, I knew of only one other taint that could compel a person against their will. The Hunter was using Charmer's vapour to control her.

He was going to kill Rieka and there wasn't a thing in this godsdamned world I could do to stop him.

"You really don't want me as your prize," were the words Rieka's lips formed. A useless emotional appeal to one who saw our kind as animals.

"Oh, but I do." He closed the distance between them, the seven collars on his arm glinting in the moonlight as he raised it to her face. Rieka flinched as he lifted a black-gloved hand to a white strand of hair that had fallen to her cheek, twirling it around a finger.

He moved closer, the angle obstructing my sight. I could only read two words on his lips. "...enjoy this."

He inched ever so close towards her, so close that his face was in the crook of her neck. *Was he smelling her?*

I struggled in the net, shifting to find a hold, to stand, to do anything to get out. I had to get out of here or he was going to gut her open and watch her bleed out. Just like he had Peia.

The Hunter's hand slipped down to her arm, then across to her hip where he grabbed it and spun her around, forcing Rieka to press her back up against him. Intimately.

A sinking feeling ebbed at my stomach and I glanced over at Peia's body. Her clothes weren't torn, they'd been ripped open.

I shook the net violently, screaming beneath the ear-splitting sound of the bottled Echo's cry for him to release her. A useless plea, and an involuntary one.

I leaned forward trying to stretch around for the pin in my hair. I'd never tried my taint on Alchemist Steel before, but at this point, I

was willing to try anything.

My eyes still locked on the inhuman creature with Rieka, with one hand wrapped around the base of her throat, the Hunter slid the other across her stomach to her coat buttons, where he unfastened one and then another until he could freely examine her chest.

As his hand moved up towards her breasts, a look fell upon her face. Rage. Pure unadulterated rage and I watched as Rieka's lips mouthed a word I didn't recognise.

In an instant, the Hunter was flung backward by some invisible force crashing into the forest floor. A feat impossible for any species except—

*She can't be!*

The Hunter's shock was short-lived, the moment he regained his footing, drawing his blade once again, Rieka had surprised him.

Claws emerging from long feminine fingers tore through the forearm of the Hunter and straight through his armour. A howl of pain ripped from the man. Fangs were drawn, eyes turned amber and the most unsettling howl I'd ever heard from an Apex erupted from Rieka's lungs. The Hunter stumbled back in shock, but she gave him no time to refocus.

Rieka ran for the man, using a nearby tree for leverage. She sprung off the trunk and came down upon the much taller man, her claws racking across his bare face. As he collapsed, she jumped upon his chest, hands striking down haphazardly in a ravenous and bloody manner, pink misting the air.

The fatal blow was fast. Rieka grabbed his head and gripped the hair on his head, lifting it to bare his neck before she sunk her teeth in. A final ruby splatter filled the air as she released him.

The Hunter's body fell hard to the ground, limp, the forest floor turning scarlet as blood pumped from the gaping wound where his windpipe had once been.

Rieka stood and simply stared at the dead man.

She didn't move. She just stared at him as the blood crawled ever so close to her feet.

*Rieka.*

Silence.



*Rieka!*

Nothing.

"Wife!"

Her head snapped around. Eyes dark and rimmed with gold, those wells of pain found me, a snarl half-formed that vanished as fast as the rage had first emerged. The predator, a creature of fury, vanished. Rieka's expression fell to one of startled surprise. Her gaze lowered to her surroundings, to the body at her feet, to the blood on her hands.

She crouched back down over the Hunter's corpse, his face frozen in an expression of terror and began rifling through his armour. She found something and displaced it on the forest floor. Then she stood and in one swift move, drove her boot down hard onto the item.

The Echo's cry died.

In utter silence, Rieka walked towards me, to the tree that held the knot to the net and released it. I fell to the ground fast, the pain of the hit bearable enough that I was able to roll into the fall to avoid getting the wind knocked out of me and came to a stop a few feet from the body.

She had utterly destroyed the man. He was unrecognisable, his face was shredded, his chest open to the air in a series of long gaping cross-hatched gashes that bared claw-carved bones to the world.

"We should go." The words were all I could manage as my mind tried to piece together the riddle that was Rieka. I'd taken her for a Stilled Brute, cursed by the gods to be unable to use her taint, a punishment for her crime of killing a god. But that couldn't account for the mind speak, the fact she had survived the Lobby, and now this.

*Rieka is a **T'eiryash**?*

I knew they were real, how of all the species of Tainted, they were the ones who did not conform to our lore and how they still retained their connection to the gods who blessed them. I knew humans often maimed those they suspected of being able to speak Gods' Tongue, and that more often than not, those allegations turned out to be false. I just never expected to meet one in the flesh.

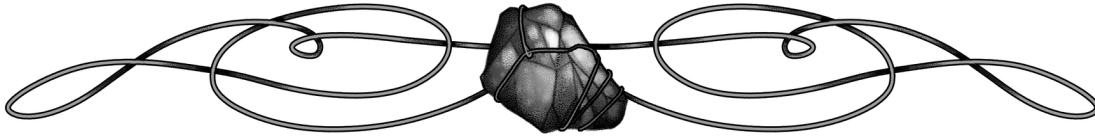
Trying to absorb this new revelation, I gathered up the collars of the dead man and tucked them inside my jacket.

Turning back around to face her, I found Rieka still standing where I'd last seen her by the tree, only her gaze was fixated on the crimson state of her gloves.

"Rieka."

She lifted her head slowly out of her stupor. "Coming," she replied, her voice hollow.

When we got back to the supply cache at the bottom of the hill, I took out the water skin and proceeded to wash my hands with its contents. Then without a word, I handed it to her where she did the same, first to clean her hands, and then to wash off the blood that had rendered her face into a scarlet mask.



## RHYDIAN

The train arrived at the station at exactly midnight. The surviving passengers all lugged their sacks over their shoulders, thoughts likely on the events that led to that moment passing across their glazed expressions. One such survivor turned out to have been Rieka's bunkmate, the dark-haired one with the brightly coloured tattoos. He'd arrived at the station at ten to midnight covered head to toe in Kensillan Hunters Armour, a pair of short blades strapped to his back and a long gun in his hand.

Hiding from the eyes of The Core on the opposite side of the tracks, I watched from afar as Rieka barely registered that her friend too had survived. A friend I would have to tell Jordry and Mal about. They would be very interested in his particular skill set. He had roped nearly thirty collars to the belt at his waist along with the insignia of every hunter he'd killed. Twelve in total.

Rieka said nothing more after her reunion, her gaze occasionally falling back to her clean hands, the gloves now somewhere in her coat, urged to hide them when her bunkmate's gaze had fallen to her hands.

I boarded the train in secret as I always had and headed straight for *MedCom* knowing I'd find Rieka there. She was standing silently beside her bunkmate, eyes unfocused.

After being informed of Peia's death, Sal gave herself no more than half a minute to grieve knowing that come sunrise, the mourning celebrations would begin. Having shed those initial tears, Sal saw to those too desperate to wait before she worked her way through the non-immediate cases. Rieka's bunkmate appeared confident enough in my concern for my "wife's" wellbeing, that he fled soon after being examined. When she arrived at us, Sal's hands moved to touch Rieka and she flinched. Sal didn't notice. No one noticed but me.

The Organic found the wound in Rieka's shoulder within moments and after requesting she bare her shoulder, Sal cleaned away the topical treatment I'd applied to treat the wound. She placed her hand over the broken flesh and started to mend it. It took several minutes but when Sal had finished, the pink had returned to Rieka's fair cheeks. But it hadn't rid her eyes of their ghostly glaze.

As Rieka began to refasten her shirt, I suggested she might like to go wash. Hoping hot water might wake her from her stupor, but not entirely confident. Rieka simply stood from the cot and silently picked up her coat.

She appeared to not even notice we were walking in the wrong direction, heading towards the front of the train. I stopped outside a familiar door in the private sleeper carriage and listened. The room was vacant. That was good.

I opened the door and went straight for the tub. One of only four on the entire train, I knew this time of day it would be free. As I turned on the faucet, I heard slow cautious feet enter the space.

"Whose room is this?" Rieka asked sombrely.

I deigned a glance at her over my shoulder and found her walking further into the room, her eyes taking it in. "My sister's." I didn't bother explaining further knowing she'd already met Lily yesterday. And she didn't ask why Lily wasn't in her room after midnight. An explanation for another time.

I walked over to the closet as the water began to fill the giant tub and pulled a towel, sponge and soap from it placing them on the stool Lily used as a tea station, then I retrieved the Kindling Orb from the bedside, twisted it and dropped it in the water. When I

turned back around Rieka was standing in the middle of the room, already stripping off her clothes.

Staring at the tub, she unbuttoned her pants and pulled them down uncovering the exquisite mound of ink black between her long-toned legs. Beneath the singlet she discarded on the floor, nipples hardening in the crisp air, she revealed two perfectly sized breasts.

Rieka didn't wait for the tub to fill, nor did she check the temperature. She just approached the tub and climbed over the side, the water rising as she seated herself.

"I'll leave you to it then," I said, turning the water off when the tub had filled and headed for the still-open door.

***"Stay."***

Hand gripping the door handle, I peered over my shoulder. Rieka had her knees up under her chin, arms hugging her legs. And she held me with such a gaze I found myself immobile, incapable of moving so long as those stormy clouds held me in their grasp.

There was a part of me that wondered if this was part of the plan to seduce me, the same part that kept me on my path, kept me focused on my goal. The rest of me wanted to stay.

The rest of me won.

*"If you wish it."*

The door closed with a soft click and I moved to sit on the end of Lily's bed. Four feet from the tub.

Her voice invaded my thoughts once again. ***"On the stool?"***

I obliged her. As I did, Rieka began to untie the fastening in her hair, her hands trembling with every move. I found myself reaching towards her hands, the compulsion to help her overtaking my better judgment. I should have pulled away, should have left the room. Instead, I found myself asking permission.

"May I?"

Rieka silently moved, turning her back towards me and leaned against the wall of the tub.

I deposited my jacket on the bed and shifted so I could pull at the leather strap I'd given her, several strands falling loose as I did. With tentative fingers, I began unravelling the thick strands that hours

earlier I'd seen her create. I separated them from one another, attempting to pry apart the white strands that had been fused together in scarlet clumps.

As the final strand fell loose and I combed my fingers through them, I pushed down on the feeling that clawed at my chest. That I had crossed some invisible line I couldn't return from.

I used the wooden jug Lily had borrowed from *The Bathhouse* and poured water over Rieka's hair. Her scalp darkened under the water, as though black roots were growing beneath the white. As I rubbed at the strands to remove the blood, the clumps having softened under the water, Rieka finally spoke.

"I was nineteen when my brother abandoned his post." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "I'd finally received my civic duty orders. Since I had become the responsibility of the Celestial Offices, he no longer felt I was a danger to our parents."

I poured the water over her hair once again, unsure how to answer.

"I was so young when I hurt my mother that I have no memories of the event." I caught myself hesitating, my grip momentarily failing on the jug's handle at her words. My own mother's face came to mind, the last smile she ever gave me.

Then quite casually Rieka added, "Sundering isn't uncommon in Deos." I knew that much. It was voluntary in fact. Self-inflicted by the most elite of society to show their devotion to The Celestials.

"No one knew that I was the one who hurt her so badly no Organic could heal her."

I turned my attention to soaping the strands, my voice nowhere to be found.

"A Brute without control over their blessing is not something one speaks of in civilised society." She let her hands float to the water's surface absentmindedly. "A shame without a name," she lamented as her thumb rubbed at the black tattooed dots on her wrist.

Rieka leaned forward as I poured the water over her soap-lathered hair. When she leaned back again, her voice became soft. "The first person who died at my hands was a friend."

Unexpectedly, Rieka took my hand from her hair and pulled me forward, forcing me to leave the stool and kneel on the floor where we came face to face. With my hand still firmly in her grasp, she pulled it down to her neck. To beneath the collar where I knew there to be a long scar that stretched the width of her throat. "Her dying gift to me," Rieka said.

I felt the raised skin of the scar beneath my fingertips. A clean cut. Perfectly mended. Whenever this had happened, she'd been tended to with care.

She held my hand flush against her warm skin, her voice resonating under my fingertips. "You know what I am don't you?"

"Well, you're certainly not Stilled." I was unable to say the word aloud just yet.

Tears welled in her eyes. Rieka dropped my hand, her stare becoming unfocused. **"I'm a monster,"** her inner voice lamented.

My self-control abandoned me. Or perhaps I fled from it. Before she could slink away in whatever sea of loathing she had created for herself, I reached for her hand and squeezed. "You're no monster, Rieka."

Her voice quivered. "Rhydian, I bespelled that man and then tore him apart!"

I leaned in close so she would understand me, scent me, and know that what I said I meant. "And he deserved it. Worse probably. A Hunter like that, he was soaked in the blood of our kind, Rieka."

The gaze which had been so fixated on our hands, snapped up at my words. "And that makes it right?"

"It makes it justified," I replied, my voice steady in my resolve. "They kill us for sport. We kill them for survival. What you did was no different."

Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Opinions are subjective."

"So are monsters."

I knew what I did next was stupid. Ridiculously dumb. But Apexes were tactile, especially wolves. Touch meant more than words, and I needed her to hear me. I needed her. She was the only thing in this world that could help me save my family. But in this moment, this was what mattered.

And if telling myself I would have done it for any of my people hushed the warning in my head then so be it. I lifted my hand and placed it against her cheek and left it there. Instinctively, Rieka leaned into the touch, and perhaps thoughtlessly, or by some instinct of my own, I began stroking her cheek.

Rieka held my gaze. An eternity passed in her eyes. An alarm could have rung for another Hunt and I would have kept staring, only looking away when she was ready. She finally leaned in, her forehead coming to rest on my own, a form of contact I'd only seen a few times from Brutes I knew to be intimate.

She sighed heavily as her hands slid up my arms, hands that had ceased their trembling and came to rest on the nape of my neck. With my hand still on her cheek, Rieka turned her head and gently kissed my palm.

I tried to withdraw it immediately, but Rieka caught it. Grasping my wrist, she brought it to her lips where she began to kiss me further. Once again across my palm, then down to my wrist where she lightly sucked at the skin as she held the kiss there. My breath hitched dangerously in my throat.

It caught her attention. Wild eyes flew to mine and Rieka moved fast. Our lips collided, my sanity a casualty of her touch. She kissed me deeply as desire swept over me, as my body called to hers. She clung to me, her hands rough and desperate as they pulled at me to get closer.

Sanity surely had fled as I let her pull me into the tub, the water sloshing out around us, a tidal wave to accompany the symphony of beats her heart was conducting.

Even her inner voice was breathless. ***"Take me Rhydian."***

I wanted to. As our bodies pressed against one another, as my hands explored the curves of her body, the lines of her hips perfection in my hands, she begged me. ***"Take me now."***

Frenzied hands pulled at my shirt until water lapped at my chest. As I braced myself on the tub frame, Rieka's dangerous lips drew every breath from me that I scarcely recalled why I'd avoided this in the first place.

***"Make me forget."***



Abruptly I withdrew. "What?"

Rieka gripped my neck, desperately trying to drag me back into the water, back against her. But I refused to be pulled back under. I stared at her in shock—disbelief perhaps. I felt disgusted. Not at her. At myself. For not realising sooner what this was.

"Rhydian, I—" She hesitated as I stood, her hand clinging to mine as though it were an anchor tethering her in place. I could not become that.

I stepped out of the water.

"That's it?" she clipped.

Water pooled at the base of my sister's bed when I retrieved my soaked shirt from the floor, a trail of puddles left by each saturated boot as they made contact with the cabin floor as I circled the bed.

"We do all that and you're just going to leave?" she said unabashedly, standing up in the tub, as though seeing her naked, seeing what I was missing out on would make me change my mind about leaving.

She could not be serious? "How is it I have more respect for you than you do?"

She paled, her expression turning hard. "Excuse me?"

I picked my jacket off the bed. "I'm a prick Rieka, but I'm not that kind of prick. Vulnerable women are not my thing."

She crossed her arms over her breasts, the water dripping down those long white locks, a goddess incarnated if I didn't hate the very idea of them. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"I want to fuck you Rieka. I made that very evident just now. I am happy to be used, more than happy on any other occasion. But not this way. Not because of *that* monster." I swallowed the bile the thought of that man brought up. The image of his hands on her. I shook the thought from my mind. A man should never touch a woman the way he did, least they want to keep those hands along with their life.

I cleared my throat. "If you had not killed him, I would have. But I don't believe myself a monster for admitting that. Proposition me again when you realise that too."

I turned and headed for the door.

Water sloshed as Rieka moved in the tub and a moment later pain shot through the centre of my back when something hard collided with it. It clattered to the ground behind me.

Rieka had picked up the wooden jug and thrown it at me.

"You are a prick. Happy to fuck me, but only when it's on your terms," she said sharply.

I took a step forward, anger boiling inside me. Anger that she would think so little of herself, and anger that it bothered me so much. I abruptly stopped, my fist tightening its grip on the leather of my jacket. "And what are your terms Rieka? Only monsters should fuck other monsters? Fuck that. My pride is mine to destroy, not yours."

She fell silent so I made the conscious choice to leave before I let either of us make an even bigger mistake than we'd already made.

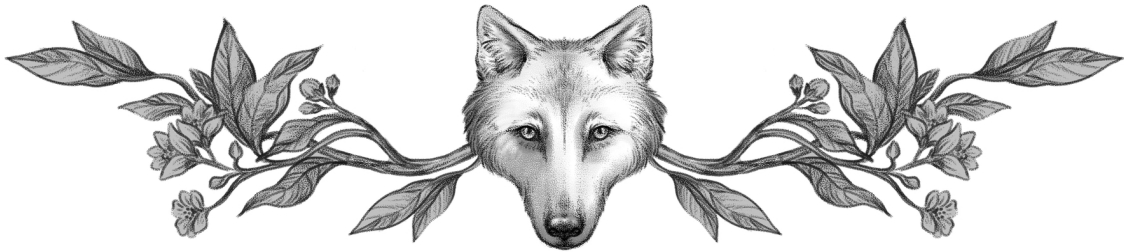
"Do yourself a favour and find something else to ease the burden you carry," I said with my hand on the door handle. "This prison is long and too unrelenting to those who fail to see their own worth."

Tears began to fill her eyes once more, and I cursed myself for being the reason they appeared, but I could not lie to her. Would not. The arms that had once crossed her chest in indignation now braced her naked body in comfort. Her words were soft, but there was no mistaking the anger that laced them. "How can a man who can come and go as he pleases call this place a prison?"

I knew her words weren't meant to cut, but they struck the bone regardless. Hard and violently.

"I have shackles of my own, darling wife," I answered bitterly, reminding myself of our true relationship, of why I had left the train in the first place. "I do not plan on letting you become another."

I closed the door behind me, the haunted expression on her face burning into my mind as I fled to the confines of my room. I pulled the arrowhead from my jacket pocket, Rieka's blood still staining the dark metal edges and contemplated whether my desire to see her memories was out of anger or something else entirely.



## RIEKA

The water should have gone cold hours ago. The Kindling Orb Rhydian had deposited in the tub ensured that I'd never have to get out if I didn't want to. The fact he'd even had the forethought to do that made the ache in my chest constrict.

I'd fucked up. It certainly hadn't felt that way when his hands were running over my body. But Rhydian's face. His scent. It had gone from desperate desire to repulsion so fast it turned my stomach. I'd needed to feel something, anything after the hunt, after —

The image of that Hunter's corpse resurfaced, his blood covering my hands, staining my gloves. The feeling of utter satisfaction I'd awoken to with the buttery taste of his blood on my lips.

I forced them away, pushing the images down into the depths of the cavern where my essence dwelled. In the deep dark, I could survive with it there. It was the only way I could survive. Rhydian had been so warm and calm and comforting. He'd seen it, seen the monster, heard the poisonous word slip from my tongue and he had remained the same. Everyone who had ever seen that side of me had changed after. The way they looked at me, spoke to me, behaved. Even their scents changed around me. But not him. For some unfathomable reason, Rhydian had remained unchanged and,

in that moment, I wanted that. I wanted to absorb it through my skin, soak in his calm scent as though it would become my own and replace the blood-soaked one I possessed. I wanted him.

Not for him, but for what he could do for me. Provide me with.

*Only a monster can love a monster.*

Gods, I repulsed myself.

By the time the morning had begun to peek through the curtained windows of the room, I'd scrubbed my skin raw, destroying any trace of both men upon my body.

With a towel wrapped around my body, unsure what else to do with myself, I sat on the stool and took in the room. It was large, the bed alone was big enough to sleep four people even though I could only detect two scents. Perhaps certain passengers garnered certain privileges.

The walls were a warm brown and gold, the wallpaper repaired with wood varnish and glue where it had started peeling away. A long lounge was bolted to one wall, the cushions carefully positioned in either corner. The opposite wall held a desk covered in personal items, the two chairs beneath it mended at least a dozen times with various pieces of fabric, the fusion lines seamless. The items on the surface of the table were carefully placed, his side and her side if the items were anything to go by. A hair comb, a ribbon, a book of poetry, another book titled 'Recipes'. And nearly everything here bore the same two marks. I recognised one from my time in *The Kitchen*.

This was Lily's room. Her scent was weaved with another. Someone intimate. The sheets, the scent of the clothes seeping from the slightly open wardrobe were divided between the two scents.

Even the copper tub smelled of them.

I turned my attention to the wall above the table, to the dozens of pieces of parchment that had been fastened to the wall with glue and nails, others strung up with string and pegs. Charcoal sketches, lead sketches, even ink sketches filled the space. Lily's bright and welcoming face was the subject of many, some featured her in her current pregnant state. Others were of a man I recognised from the

Fight Hall, the Setrali, a gentle and handsome face with a soft smile. They were even together in some of the pieces.

Kosha, Rhydian's grandfather was in three that I could count. A very stoic figure. One piece featured Kosha with another woman, young with wavy hair, her features akin to Lily's. I noticed her in several pieces. Some on her own, her face sketched in different angles as though someone was trying to capture every part of her face to paper. There was one where she sat side by side with Lily, the two appearing almost as twins. Another she sat beside a tall man, short, cropped hair looking at her with utter adoration. In another, she was smiling down on the figure of a little boy.

A familiar little boy. It was his eyes. The longer I stared at them the easier it was to see the blue in the charcoal.

*Rhydian.*

The door clicked. The scent of wine and spiced meat filled the room as Lily entered, the slightest of waddles to her step. She greeted me with a smile. "Oh good you're still here. My feet could just not handle walking that distance again to find you."

I stood from the stool. "You were looking for me?" A part of me found that odd.

"Of course. Couldn't very well have you walking around the train naked as the day you were born now, could I?" She closed the door behind her with one hand, the other securing a pile of fabric to her hip.

She approached the bed and laid them out. They were clean in comparison to my own clothes which were currently still on the ground where I'd left them. A pair of short trousers with a drawstring belt, a long-sleeved pullover blouse, a knee-length sleeveless shirt and a bright yellow shawl. She also placed down a set of silk undergarments that looked to be of a foreign make. At least to me.

Lily sighed longingly at the piece. "I may curse the day any Kensillan is born, but even I will admit they do make beautiful undergarments." She handed me one. A pearlescent silk one-piece undergarment with lace trim around the thighs and ribbon straps

over the shoulders crisscrossing over the back. It was rather beautiful.

I'd only worn a garment this exquisite on one occasion and I'd burned it the first chance I got.

"Oh and these," Lily added pulling a pair of gloves from her pocket. "Rhydian said yours needed to be washed."

"Rhydian said that?" He'd spoken to Lily since leaving? I couldn't fathom it.

Her gaze searched the room and upon finding my clothes on the floor she went to retrieve them. She took in the blood splatter on the shawl, the tear in the shoulder on my buckskin vest. Lily made no comment regarding any of it except to say, "*The Laundry* will have them cleaned and repaired in no time."

"I've never really let anyone touch my belongings before," I said, suppressing the part of me that wanted to pull everything from her grasp and hold on to them tightly. I preoccupied my hands with fastening the buttons of the silk undergarment but fumbling to my utter shame.

"Do they all bear your mark?" Lily asked as she placed my clothes on the stool to help me dress, her fingers deft at the buttoning process. I simply nodded in response.

"Then you have nothing to worry about." Lily then indicated to the new garments on the bed. "Rhydian saw to it that those too bare your mark."

I stared at the marks embroidered into the garments. "Why are they so important?" I asked, my thumb brushing over the raised embroidery on a pant leg.

Lily suddenly paused, her lips pursed. "I guess the best way to explain it is—our property is considered an extension of ourselves. We have no home but this train. We possess nothing but what we arrived in. To claim an item that does not bear your mark is like cutting someone's hand off and claiming it as your hand. It is one of our most stringent laws. Personal property is exactly that; Personal. Never take what is not yours or..." she hesitated.

"Or what?" I asked sitting on the edge of the bed.

She sighed and took a few steps closer. "Theft of personal property is considered a worse offence than acts of physical violence."

My expression must have conveyed my disbelief, so she added, "I was born on this train. As was Rhydian. We have earned our places and earned our possessions since the day we turned 16. Before that Rhydian was protected under our mother's mark, and I under Rhydian's. But that wasn't always the way. For centuries those born on the train were allowed to be killed simply because another collarless passenger saw them as a potential threat to their obtaining a collar and the rations that came with the position. The train was a war zone. Families destroyed one another in revenge for killing their children. So generations ago the council declared all children protected until they were the same age as the youngest prisoner to run a Hunt."

"Sixteen." *The rule.*

Lily nodded. "And they did that by creating the Mark System. Now children are marked as their parent's property for their protection, to serve as a reminder that personal property is as important to a passenger as their own flesh and blood. It does not matter what it is. You steal or destroy something that does not bear your mark, and the marked one can challenge you to a fight to seek justice."

It now made sense, why all the children bore marks on their hands.

I changed the subject, the thoughts of the children and the dark future that still awaited them threatening to breach the surface of my mind. "And how exactly does one earn their possessions?"

Lily smiled, as though it was her favourite topic. "Trade of course."

"Trade?" I looked down at the garments. Perhaps there were Spindles on the train who made clothes for passengers. A trade of services not dissimilar to the Kanahari.

Lily frowned. "Didn't Rhydian tell you?" She tutted under her breath. "He went to the markets after your return from the Hunt and traded some of the supplies."

I'd seen the contents of the supply cache. Had there really been enough in that sack to sacrifice for a few measly garments? I'd

sooner wait here in a towel for my clothes to wash than waste some much-needed supplies, especially when only a portion was mine. "Is that even allowed?" I asked, pulling on the blouse.

"It's how things are done here. I wouldn't have traded that camisole if it weren't for those packets of freeze-dried eggs in the cache."

"Oh Lily I can't take this." I went to remove the blouse but Lily caught my hands.

"I haven't worn it in months Rieka. Not since—" She looked down and patted her stomach. "This little one decided to show herself. It may be Jae's favourite but even he would admit he'd rather have eggs for breakfast. Besides, you need underwear. They may be impractical for a Hunt but they still give ample coverage."

She wouldn't listen to any more of my objections. Trade of goods and trade of skills was commerce in this prison. It was best I get used to it. *Gods she sounds like her brother.*

When I'd finally finished dressing, surprised the clothes fit perfectly, Lily took my hand and led me over to one of the desk chairs. She then did the last thing I expected her to do. She combed my hair. I couldn't recall the last time anyone combed my hair. My eyes grew heavy at her touch, her hands near as gentle as my own mother's had once been. After she finished, she began to weave the strands together in a braid.

"Our mother used to do her hair like this," Lily said, her voice tinged with sadness. "Your hair is long like hers was, so it should suit you."

"Is that who is in the drawings, your mother?" I gazed up at the bright woman in the central sketch on the wall.

"Her name was Eydis."

*Was* she had said, meaning their mother was— "I'm sorry."

"My brother married you and yet kept so many things close to the chest." It wasn't a question, but rather an observation.

This wasn't good. I'd made the deal with her brother, not her. Nothing was forcing Lily to abide by the same agreement. And if she was a Hemopath too, killing me might very well be in her favour. I tried to keep my heart rate steady, convincing even myself that I had



nothing to hide. "Does that surprise you?" I tried to make my voice sound flippant. It worked.

Lily laughed. "Not in the least. My brother tends to be too serious for his own good. He needs someone to keep him on his toes. Force him to live his life for himself and not for everyone else.

"All done," she then said as she placed a small mirror before me. High cheekbones, delicate nose, full lips, features one might find on a woman of refined breeding. The white hair which I had once considered odd against my features was wound in a thick braid over my shoulder, the strands thin and twisted like threads of satin rope. The collar upon my neck looked like nothing more than a thick metal torq that glistened under the Bright-lights of the room. The girl in the mirror looked like she hadn't just torn a man to pieces without any recollection. No, this woman looked as though she'd never been rejected by her "husband." This woman looked clean, and cared for, and like she hadn't been running for her life for the last year. This woman was beautiful.

What a difference a bath could make.

"Now," Lily said as she waddled around to face me, a hand gently resting on her stomach. "Have you been to any of *The Commons* yet?"



The Kensillan Territory Rail had three *Commons* areas. *The Cantina* was situated between *The Fight Hall* and *The Group Sleepers*. It was the carriage with the gambling and card tables I'd passed through on my first night here. The same compartment with the bar—according to Lily—was run by Tolen, the best brewer west of Rinnisar.

However, the carriage Lily led me to was at the front of the train situated between *The Aviary*, a carriage utilised for flying by Alatus,

and *The Private Sleeper Cabins*, where Lily's room was located. The lower level was *The Market Commons*, the place where Rhydian had acquired my new wardrobe. Lily explained it had stations set up in little alcoves where passengers could trade their skills or their own items, with Spindles on hand to provide exchanges of marks.

When I asked if the train actually received enough to trade with, Lily said the Runners often acquired items that could be repurposed, like furniture that Sal as an Organic could rework into something else. Sometimes it was as simple as bringing back a curtain they found which the Spindles could reweave into half a dozen garments, or copper plates the Smiths could use to mend the train's mechanics. Everything was worth something to someone. Even items formerly owned by passengers who died in the Hunts would end up in *The Markets* since their marks no longer held any meaning unless they had a child who bore their mark. Then the items belonged to that child.

However, it was the top level of the carriage where Lily had led me. She called it *The Theatre*.

I honestly hadn't expected to find an actual theatre in such a confined space. I'd only been allowed to go to one when I was nineteen because my caste had been elevated to Devout so my family was finally able to acquire tickets.

*The Theatre* had private viewing booths along the edges. The back quarter had row upon row of cushioned chairs, whilst the middle of the room—where more seats should have been—was barren. The chairs that once would have lined the centre had been stripped away, leaving ample space for passengers to lie on blankets and pillows enjoying whatever form of entertainment happened to bless the stage that filled the back of the compartment.

When Lily and I arrived there, passengers were in the midst of giving speeches for those lost to The Hunt. What I'd expected to be a solemn event, was instead a celebration. The woman on stage had just reached the pinnacle of the story she was telling about one of the dead passengers when it caused the entire carriage to burst into laughter.

Over the next half hour, we listened to three more speeches, all of which Lily was happy to translate for me since most were spoken in Seja. When the fourth speaker finally walked on stage, I found myself oddly relieved that I recognised them. Dark hair shorn short and sad eyes. He was the Setrali from the drawings in Lily's room. With a mug of ale in his hand, he turned to the crowd causing Lily to instantly perk up in her chair. This was why we were here.

He tried to speak but emotion seemed to catch in his throat.

"All Steady, Jae?" Lily shouted lovingly from beside me. Doubtful I'd cope well in this situation without a chaperone, I'd chosen to accompany her. I'd never experienced an event where death was celebrated due to its association with life. Such a contrast to the way I'd been brought up, so foreign and unusual.

Jae, the man I had deduced as Lily's partner since it was his smell in her room, looked up from the ground. Upon finding her face in the crowd, a teary-eyed smile emerged.

"Steady," he replied softly.

Jae took a deep breath, his free hand brushing over his face before speaking.

"Becks hated speeches," he'd said according to Lily's translation.

"And if you dared try to get him on this stage on Story Night, he'd sooner challenge you to a fight than give a speech. He was the only card player I knew who didn't have a tell during the game but had one when he was trying to play a prank on someone. And he taught me to never feel sorry for my circumstances," Jae sniffled as he continued. "My story isn't that different from anyone else's here." Someone in the crowd yelled out, "Except for the Lobby Free pass." A comment which got a half-hearted humorous response from the crowd.

"Yes. A fact none of you will let me live down," Jae jabbed at the audience with a smile. "Becks called me lucky in that regard. A human child bought and sold by slavers. Collared at the age of eight, and dropped off on your doorstep with nothing to trade but the silk robes I'd been found in. Another piece of luck."

I wasn't sure how lucky he was if he was forced into a Hunt that young. I couldn't even fathom how he survived.

"Luck was a fifty-five-year-old Runner with a hard-on for fighting and a vendetta against anyone who would enslave a child. As a Runner he volunteered for every Hunt I was forced to enter, and taught me how to take a punch. Stabbed me once just so I knew what it felt like and spoke for me when I married my Lily." Their eyes locked as they shared a smile across *The Theatre*.

"Becks was not my father." Jae paused, his shoulders rising with a heavy sigh. "So he damn well better be in our next life." He raised his glass and the room followed suit. "To Becks."

"To Becks!"

As much as I enjoyed the speech, the end confused me. I leaned towards Lily who watched as her husband downed his ale with vigour. "The gods only gave us one life, what does he mean next life?"

"Some on the train don't take to the gods' way of things. Becks was one of them. He believed that death only existed for the body and that the spirit lived on, waiting until it could choose to live again."

I turned to her, shock no doubt on my face. "He was Kanahari?"

"Did you think you were the only Northerner on the train?" the pregnant woman sighed. "This is your home now Rieka, you should really explore it more. You might actually find things you like that are further than that bunk of yours."

*Did she just scold me?*

I left Lily to be with her husband, certain I would see her tomorrow. After a Hunt, celebrating instead of working seemed to be the order of the day. Work rotation didn't begin again until tomorrow evening when Lily expected me back in *The Kitchen*. A fact she clearly stated from the arms of her husband when he saw fit to return her to her bed due to exhaustion. I was shocked to discover the reason why she hadn't been in her room at midnight was because she and several other passengers had been cooking the entire day I was gone on the Hunt. They had made fresh stew from the root vegetables I'd seen in the storeroom.

Uncertain what to do with myself now, I decided to head back to my sleeper carriage, seeking out the familiar faces of my bunkmates.

I hadn't travelled far before I caught their scents coming from the Mess. They stood gathered together at the end of one of the tables. All six of them.

They were talking in hushed voices, a few brows narrowed, gazes glancing off through the doorway I'd just walked through.

Tira, whose voice was normally soft-spoken, was voicing an opinion in a tone that was anything but. "I vote we take it from her. If it is as she claims, then I can simply take it from her."

"That's still called stealing Tira," Farox explained to the pacing Terrestrial.

"Should we not talk to her?" Hentirion's deep voice cautioned. "Perhaps explain to her to whom it belongs?"

"If she is going so far as to trade it, then I doubt very much she doesn't know whose it is." Emil sounded exasperated as he fiddled with the metal filaments in his hands. "They'd likely know every new item that comes into this place."

"But we know it's Rieka's, right?" S'vara questioned the group irately. "We can't just let her trade it."

"Let who trade what?" I asked, finally within earshot of the non-Brutes. Hentirion peered at me from over Emil, both men looking at me with pensive expressions.

S'vara reminded me of Kris at that moment. Pursed lips, curly hair, eyes narrowed into slits. The expression quickly vanished when she realised it was me and not some eavesdropper. The redheaded she-wolf rushed to hug me, her forehead joining with mine, the clear acknowledgement that as far as she was concerned, I was part of her pack. The moment was cut short by the impact of Tira as she collided with us, both of us having to quickly shift our heads to avoid her antlers.

"Rieka!" she squealed. "I'm so glad you didn't die."

"Child!" Hentirion softly scolded, as though the word spoken aloud held some kind of taboo.

Tira ignored him, the smile on the girl's face enough to make any angry heart soften.

Any face that was pleased to see me was welcome at this point, but as much as I was pleased to see them all, I repeated myself. "I'll

say again, who can't we let trade what?"

Their expressions all dulled. None were willing or even certain they should answer. Except Saska. Leaning back on the table, quite nonchalantly cleaning out his nails with a small dagger, he provided me with the answer.

"The little Terrestrial saw that smoking pouch of yours in the possession of your husband's former lover. She saw her walk into *The Market Commons* with it." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder.

My stomach dropped. My pulse drummed in my ears.

The pouch. I'd left it in my bunk along with my coat on account of the training I'd had with Rhydian. I had my coat but—it must have fallen out when Rhydian had retrieved it. I went over Saska's words again. Eleen. He'd meant Eleen, right? Eleen had taken it?

"She can't trade it. Everything I had on me the day we arrived all got those marks." I pulled up at the hem of my new shirt where the same mark had been placed by a Spindle.

S'vara shook her head. "Tira had me follow Eleen, Ree. These people are serious about personal possessions. If it had your mark on it, the five passengers I saw look at it wouldn't have touched it if it did."

That wasn't possible, was it? Had the Spindles missed it that day, I'd put it in my coat for safekeeping on the death train. Had they not found it when they took my stuff to mark it?

I turned towards the doorway of *The Aviary* and stretched my senses out beyond the large cavernous carriage and to the next.

I took one step towards the threshold before I was cut off by Farox, his hulking sun-kissed frame blocking my path. I willed the anger in me to subside before I looked up at the Drake with the crooked yet charming smile. "Are you planning on stopping me from retrieving what's mine?"

His expression turned to one of mock surprise. "Who me? Course not. I like a fight as much as the next Drake." That answer got a scolding sigh from Hentirion.

"As a matter of fact." The corners of Farox's mouth quirked up. "Are you aware of the legal way in which passengers are permitted to deal with disputes?"

A string of rather eloquent profanities flew from Hentirion's mouth in the same moment Saskia packed up his knife, presumably because the conversation had taken a more interesting turn.

I let Farox fill me in on the particulars as I tracked Eelen through *The Aviary* and onto *The Market* carriage.

Bodies crowded into the long space, voices and smells I'd paid no attention to before now the only thing in my focus. I searched out her scent. Like freshly squeezed limes sipped by the seaside, she had the most distinct of scents amongst the Currents on the train, perhaps the most powerful.

Eelen stood before a stall tended to by an old woman, Kris' smoking pouch still in her hand. She paused her conversation when she noticed my approach.

"I believe you have something that belongs to me." I made sure my voice carried. Witnesses were essential according to Farox.

Eelen, an unperplexed expression on her face turned to greet me. "All steady, Rieka?"

"Unfortunately, no." I looked down at the gift pouch, my stomach twisting with the knowledge that she held the last piece of my brother left in all the world. "That smoking pouch. Where did you find it?"

Without any hint of remorse, she replied, "Your bunk."

"And you didn't feel the need to ask any of my bunkmates if it belonged to someone? Say me, perhaps?" I tried to keep my voice steady. But it wasn't easy, I'd always gotten seasick in boats, and her scent made me nauseous.

"Why should I have? It bears no mark." Eelen was clearly doing this intentionally. Like she had expected this. Her scent didn't even possess a hint of anxiety.

"That smoking pouch is mine, Eelen. I bought it as a gift for a friend."

*Whom your friend sold as a slave.* I wished I'd said the words aloud just to see that egotistical expression on her face falter. "I would like it back please."

She shrugged, her expression wholly unsympathetic. "I don't need to give it back to you. An unmarked item belongs to no one. Free

trade item."

The charm which her soft features had held vanished when the lines of her face hardened. An elegant beauty turned callous.

I cleared my throat. "And yet I'm claiming it as mine."

There it was, the slight change to her scent, the sweet undercurrent of excitement as her eyes lit up. This is exactly what she wanted. How fortunate for her I was in the mood for a fight.

Eleen closed the distance between us, her voice low. "You agree to this and not even Rhydian can save you."

"You let me worry about my husband," I said, noticing the way her eye twitched as I said the word. "Just declare it already."

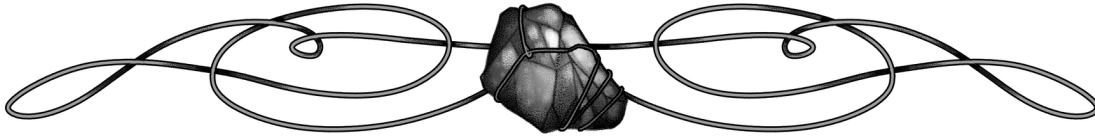
She smiled. "Oh no. The pleasure is all yours."

*I'm definitely going to enjoy this.*

With my eyes focused on Eleen, the pouch still in my periphery, I declared my intention.

"I challenge you to a fight."





## RHYDIAN

**B**lack ink coated my hands, sunk into the whorls of my fingertips, each line a plunging of the shovel into the dirt. The digging of a grave I was unable to provide for them except on parchment. Twenty-seven graves I was unable to dig. Twenty-seven lives that were my responsibility. Twenty-seven lives that would now be nothing but faces on a wall.

I'd spent hours drawing them, ingraining their faces into memory as my fingers sketched their likenesses. They were owed that much. Too many faces had been lost to memory, too many names forgotten in the last five centuries. A prison that never stopped had no time to remember its prisoners. But someone had to.

And it was a much-needed distraction.

I pinned number twenty-seven to the wall above my desk. A young man named Yaron. He'd been a Spindle who sang the most beautiful Lycoan hymns. He'd been a passenger for two months. This was his second Hunt.

One day, when this was all over, and the survivors could look up and bathe in the sun, with grass beneath their bare feet, and no death sentence around their necks, I would make sure that they remembered those names. A wall, a monument to those lost on their path to freedom.

A harsh hand knocked on my door. It wasn't necessary but the Runners insisted on giving me my privacy some days. Today, the day I learned my "wife" was a T'eiryash, was one of them.

The door slid open revealing Wade's broad frame, the corridor light turning his hair a burning shade of red not unlike the shade of his foster sister's embers. Gala. She often joked Wade was more Kindling than her, given that temper of his. His gaze lifted to the drawings on the wall momentarily before flicking to me. The expression on his face was the same one he had worn days earlier when he'd informed us why someone had died by his hand.

I wasn't going to like what he was about to say.

"Just tell me if I have to make an excuse for your behaviour to the council?" I asked him as I packed up the box of charcoal they had gifted me for my seventeenth name day, more than half of the contents gone.

Wade shuffled his feet on the wooden floors. His pulse was faster than usual. "It's not me this time."

I turned, not entirely surprised. The other Runners hadn't exactly been calm these last few weeks. Not with the missions being called off. They were all antsy. Letting off steam in *The Fight Hall* hadn't been enough. They'd all been requesting to join the Hunts. 'Killing one Hunter at a time', was all that was keeping them in check since the mission to the Old Capital was called off.

"Who then?" Amida was a possibility, since the loss of her sister, the purple-haired Slyph had begun to turn callous, taking too many risks on the runs. Her husband, Jordry, was all that was keeping her stable. But I wouldn't put it past Lex to pick a fight. Four months was a long time for someone to be aboard the train when they were collarless. That's how long he'd been confined to the rail, ordered to remain with his twin sister Lera since the mission had been put on hold. Filora didn't want to risk him crossing through enemy territory without a safe house established. And we'd lost five Runners when the last one had been found by the Kensillan Army. We couldn't risk both our Skin Weavers, let alone just one.

Wade's mouth set into a hard line. "Eleen. She's going to fight your wife."

I was not in the mood for one of their pranks. "My wife? Eleen is going to fight Rieka?" It would have been hilarious if it wasn't at all terrifying. After what I saw Rieka do to that Hunter, I really hoped he was joking. Eleen's dislike of my "wife" was well known amongst all the Runners, but challenging her to a fight, over our issues—

*Fuck!*

I had told them all in the meeting not two hours ago that Rieka was a T'eiryash. And I made it abundantly clear that Rieka had no control over her taint. It was the reason she wasn't a fighter, why I insisted on volunteering for The Hunt to protect her after returning so soon from a run, and why I wanted them to be careful with their thoughts around her.

I couldn't have them revealing resistance intelligence unknowingly to a woman who was going to fall into enemy hands in a few months. Not that I told them that last part.

All I confirmed was that as a T'eiryash, she had the unusual capacity to converse without speaking aloud. I spoke nothing of her ability to speak Gods' Tongue. And as expected, they didn't ask.

Wade finally nodded in acknowledgement of my question.

"And why the fuck would Eleen challenge my wife to a fight when I had strictly forbidden anyone from approaching Rieka so soon after her Hunt?" Wade had never been afraid of me, he thought I was human after all, but I didn't fail to notice the slightest uptick in his heart rate when my voice rose.

The last thing I wanted was for my men to think my ability to make decisions was compromised.

"Wade?" I asked calmly.

His shoulders relaxed as he spoke. "Something about Eleen taking an unmarked smoking pouch Rieka claims is hers."



Fights were a regular occurrence. They were the only sure-fire way that disagreements could be dealt with on the train. It was why passengers turned up to fight training every day, why they took the time to learn skills from one another. Not only to survive out there but because if one was willing to fight for something small, even if it was a knife, imagine what they could do when their life was on the line.

No one questioned a fight. And no one could stop a fight. Not when both parties had agreed to the match willingly.

That was my only chance to stop this. To hope that one of those women wasn't doing this willingly and I wouldn't have to roll her body off the train in a supply sack.

A crowd had fully formed by the time I arrived in *The Fight Hall* and Tomas was already waiting in the corner of the ring for the two women to step in. Bets were being circulated throughout the room in Eleen's favour, especially since most here had witnessed or heard of her win against her current opponent during practice only yesterday. Eleen wasn't even in her favoured corner, which indicated to me that she was overly confident in this fight.

If I didn't trust the woman with my life, I would have compelled her out of the ring myself.

Her eyes told me she wasn't going to hear reason. But I had to try. "You're still going to fight her even after what I told you?"

Lera ignored us both in that stoic way of hers as she continued to strap Eleen's hands for the fight. "All I see is a woman," Eleen said, her eyes focused on the other corner of the mat.

"Please don't do this. You can pull out of the fight. There is still time." Eleen remained silent, determination etched into every line of her face.

"No, she can't." My attention snapped to Lera, her gaze remaining on Eleen's body, tapping it down to ensure her garments held no secret weapons.

Lera continued nonchalantly. "Rieka asked for the fight. Eleen accepted."

The noise of the crowd increased as Rieka entered the mat, her bunkmates forming her entourage in the opposition's corner. Sasha

as I now knew his name, the Pazgari who had killed a quarter of the Hunters in the Deadwood was whispering in her ear as he kept his eyes on Eelen. I dreaded what he was telling her, giving her ideas on top of what I knew she was already capable of. The tall tan male on her other side, with the keen eyes of a Drake strapped her hands as the red-headed she-wolf patted Rieka down, recently versed on the rules about on-train combat matches it seemed. Rieka's heart was beating the fastest of the four. Her other companions, the Haltian Scholar, the Deogn Smith with the sad eyes and the sundered Terrestrial girl who'd spoken during training yesterday stayed back on the crowd edge, the girl squeezing the Smith's hand so tightly his knuckles turned white. They were just as amped up as the rest of the crowd.

"Why did you even come, Rhydian?" Eelen said, her voice laced with the same hurt that had been there the day Oric left. "Afraid I'll kill your wife?"

"No. I'm afraid she'll kill you."

She finally looked me in the eyes, hurt etched across every inch of her face. "Where was this concern for my wellbeing when you decided to send Oric away?"

"I sent him on a mission," I said, trying to get her to see reason, but knowing she had none where Oric was concerned. Since the moment she'd met him, Eelen would have no other.

She snapped back. "You sent him on some loyalty test because apparently my word isn't good enough."

I wanted to say yes. That of course I sent him on a loyalty test. Oric was born in the Armistice Line, he had no allegiance to anyone. My trust in him had to be earned, regardless of the fact he claimed to have chosen our side. Had it not been for Eelen, and my trust in her, I would have never entrusted him with a mission so important. Instead, I said, "Is that what this is, my wife's loyalty test?"

"You have your methods, I have mine!" Eelen's jaw clenched and returned her attention to Rieka, no longer willing to speak with me.

Lera moved up beside me. "It's your wife you should really talk to. She instigated the fight because of what the pouch contained."

As my intelligence officer, it shouldn't have surprised me that she had obtained the real reason Rieka had asked for this fight. Lera presented me with the pouch. Eleen had given her proxy to hold the item until the result of the match was announced. It was nothing more than a leather smoking pouch. Setrali made.

Lera pulled on the ends, releasing the magnetic clasp. Inside was a small wadding of what appeared to be hair. Perhaps fur was the correct term, held together with a thin leather string.

"She claimed it belonged to one she called brother."

Her brother. The one who abandoned his post. *He was a wolf?*

I caught Rieka's gaze as I looked to her corner.

She said nothing as I walked the distance of the mat. It felt like miles. The floor turning to quicksand as each foot touched down. The weight of our last conversation, a boulder on my shoulders.

"Can I have a word with my wife?" I asked her companions when I finally stood before her. They gave us as much privacy as the space allowed.

"Are you sure about this?" I tried to sound like the caring husband I needed to be.

**"You should know something about me Rhydian."** Rieka's eyes bore into me. **"I never make decisions I'm not willing to follow through on."** That was as much a statement as it was a reminder of our deal.

"You understand the penalty for using your taint in a fight is exile?" Using one's taint had always led to discussions of unfair advantages. Someone long ago had decided that a fair fight had to be physical. It might not have been entirely equal between opponents, Brutes were always physically stronger than Fabricants or Sparks, but the latter could always outpace a weightier opponent, and improve their skills to win a fight. Those who broke those laws were sent to their death, banished from the train at the nearest station, and forced to survive until their collar killed them because they were called for a Hunt they could never run in.

"Yes." Rieka's response answered both of my previous questions. She bounced on her toes in anticipation.

*"You told me yourself. You're not capable of controlling your taint,"* I said, our conversation still raw in my mind, her confession on replay like a broken audio spinner.

***"You have no idea what I'm capable of.."*** Then aloud with a false tone of care, she added, "Thanks for your concern *husband.*"

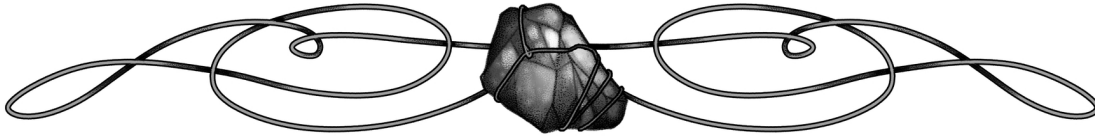
I could see a war raging behind those eyes. It wasn't hard to fathom half was because of me. "Is the pouch really that important to you?"

Her voice was steady, her gaze steadfast. "Yes."

I took a step back. "Then I wish you steady ground. Wife." Then, taking another breath, I made a choice, and I told her. *"I cannot risk losing you Rieka. If you lose control, I will not hesitate to use my taint on you."*

Rieka's hand cupped my cheek, her thumb gently caressing. She rose on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to mine, kissing me softly.

***"If you wish it. Husband."***



## RHYDIAN

Thomas called the fighters to the centre of the ring. Both of their hands strapped, hair braided back off their faces, both wearing clothes fit for a fight. Whilst Eleen had donned her training gear, Rieka had repurposed the shirt I had traded for her into some kind of body wrap. She'd torn the shirt and wrapped it around her breasts, leaving all the skin above and below bare. The muscles in her arms flexed as she closed her fists.

I took up a position along the east line of the crowd, in perfect view of Rieka.

The heartbeat of my sister, only recognisable due to years of proximity rushed up beside me, her husband not far behind. "She's not serious, is she?" Worry lined Lily's features when she voiced her concern. "Why didn't you stop her?"

"Would you really expect me to marry a woman who didn't know her own mind?" The lie came so easily it hurt. Lily didn't know the truth about Rieka, about why she was really on the train.

I had contemplated telling them all the truth, but then I would have to reveal how I found out about Rieka and from whom and I knew they wouldn't have approved. There was a reason we compartmentalized information amongst the Runners. We each had our own methods of obtaining information, and we never shared



them. Not if it helped with the ultimate goal. Freeing the passengers.

But Lily and Jae were Runners as well, and they both knew Rieka was a T'eiryash, yet the expression on my sister's face wasn't one of fear, it was guilt.

Lily's lips pursed. In a terrified whisper, she said, "Eleen's going to kill her and it's my fault."

When I asked why, she answered, "Rieka was asking about the marks, so I told her the law of personal property and the fights. Damn it!"

I wanted to reassure my sister that it wasn't her fault. That this was Eleen's doing and in turn mine. But Tomas stepped into the centre of the ring and as Train Justice, announced the fight's conditions.

Winner takes the claimed item. Loser accepts defeat and the topic is never brought up again. Fight ends when one fighter submits. Or dies was the omitted part. An acceptable result as well.

Both women performed the traditional greeting, took a step back and waited for Tomas' signal.

I took a deep breath, steadying myself as I listened for Rieka's heartbeat.

Lily's voice cut through my concentration. "What are you doing?" she whispered harshly, her voice reminding me of our mothers right before she would scold me. Even presenting as human, Lily could still detect when another Hemopath performed bloodwork as I was now.

"Quiet," I ordered her. She fell silent instantly and I knew as much as she disapproved of what I was about to do, she would not draw any attention to it. Not if she thought I was trying to protect my wife.

I sensed Rieka's heartbeat, strong and steady. It was unexpected. Most fights elevated heart rates. Even Eleen's was beating faster than usual. I pushed that feeling aside. Felt my heartbeat between hers.

They fell into sync right when Tomas yelled, "Begin."

Eleen moved first. An attempt to strike at Rieka's face fast, to knock her out quickly and end the fight. Rieka ducked and moved aside. Eleen quickly spun, slightly perplexed at missing the shot. She readjusted herself as Rieka turned on the floor to face her again. Eleen waited for Rieka to attempt a strike. To attack as she had done at training. Rieka did nothing, just slowly slid her bare feet across the mat, hands positioned before her in a protective stance.

Eleen attempted to punch Rieka again. This time as Rieka ducked, she braced her arm across Eleen's chest and swept her foot behind one of Eleen's legs. Rieka was instantly on top of her, pinning Eleen to the ground. She punched her once and then stood and backed away.

"What's she playing at?" Jae commented from beside me, confusion in his tone.

Eleen, pissed at being struck and then abandoned, jumped back into a fighting stance. The women circled one another again. Rieka continued to do nothing but circle the ring, a choice which made Eleen grow impatient. She charged at Rieka.

I held the sensation of her heartbeat, preparing myself for the moment the creature revealed itself.

Instead, as Eleen threw another punch to strike at Rieka, she blocked it. And another strike. And another.

In Eleen's rush to strike, she miscalculated her footing. Rieka bounced on her back foot, spun and kicked Eleen square in the chest. Eleen caught the brunt of it on her arm. She fell back four feet.

The crowd's excitement picked up. The odds had started to change.

Rieka struck whilst Eleen defended. They moved across the ring like two dancers caught in a trance. Rieka would twist and crouch, Eleen would glide and strike. Hits landed, blood splattered from split lips and cut brows. Neither woman willing to go easy on the other.

"Did you know she could fight like that?" Jae asked. I couldn't answer. Not when I was linked to her. Not when I was trying to protect Eleen. But was I still trying to do that? I'd made the decision to puppet Rieka to prevent even a hint of the woman from the

clearing from emerging, to protect not only everyone on the train from her but also Rieka from herself.

But was that even necessary?

Rieka knew how to fight, the display before me made that obvious. Likely a calculated deception. She'd duped me during sparring. For whatever reason, she'd chosen to play the incapable woman, and I'd believed her. But could I still believe her words now? Could I believe the words of a woman whose very existence was dangerous? What else was she hiding?

The crowd couldn't contain their disappointment when Eelen caught Rieka in the same position as their last fight. Rieka had missed a strike, allowing Eelen to wrap an arm around her neck, forcing her once again into a headlock. The fight was about to be over.

Rieka suddenly struck back with an elbow into Eelen's stomach. She dug her foot into the ground hard beside Eelen's, where she pushed out, dislodging her footing, sending Eelen off balance. The hold on Rieka's head was released, and both women fell to the floor.

Rieka had retained a hold on Eelen as they had fallen. Whilst Eelen had been prone on the ground, Rieka—with Eelen's hand clasped in her own—rolled until the arm was twisted acutely. Eelen's scream was visceral as Rieka jerked up, popping Eelen's shoulder from the socket. The arm fell to the hardwood like a dead fish.

Puzzled, Jae said, "That move, I've never seen it before."

Rieka attempted to attack from behind, to crouch atop Eelen's back, but Eelen twisted and used her legs to bind Rieka into place on the floor.

"I have."

I kept my eyes on Rieka at hearing my grandfather's voice. He'd know what I was doing, just not why. I couldn't give him any more ammunition with the council than he already had. I let Kosha inform Jae of what I'd already deduced from the fight.

"The Celestial Guard teach it."

I could feel his eyes on me as he added, "Don't they Rhydian?" I kept silent, played the worried husband, the husband willing to break a centuries-old law to protect his wife, regardless of the

consequences. My only saving grace was that he'd be exposing not only himself but Lily as well if he revealed my transgression.

The crowd cheered as Rieka braced herself and stood, Eelen's body still twisted around her own. Then she dropped, both colliding with the floor. With the wind knocked out of Eelen, Rieka skittered backward, spun on her knee and struck out with a leg, her foot connecting with Eelen's chin.

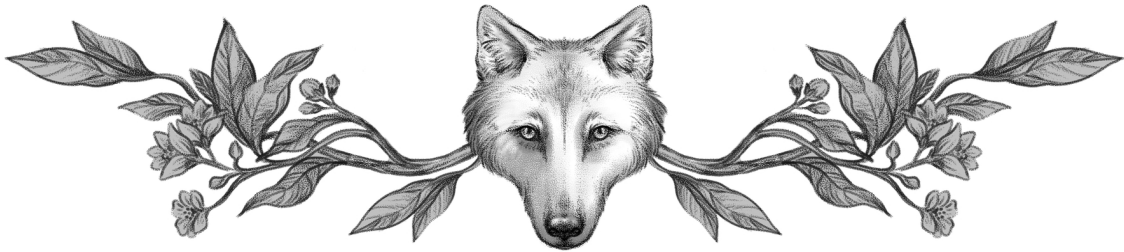
My best friend fell back with a crunch, her scream ripping through the carriage. Rieka ran forward and I prepared myself to strike. But as Rieka landed on Eelen, she moved her leg forward, connecting with Rieka's chest. Gripping her with her working arm, Eelen sent Rieka flying overhead, landing with a mighty thud on her back. The Brutes in the room flinched. Something in Rieka's back had cracked.

Even pained, noses bleeding, and a broken jaw judging by the way Eelen's face looked, the two women both rose again.

Eelen wasn't a stubborn woman. She let most people have their way. And she rarely picked fights unless someone really pissed her off. She could be as changeable as the sea, one moment she was mad at you for stealing the last mince pie at dinner and wouldn't talk to you for a week, the next she was sneaking into your bunk because your mutual friend was snoring the roof off her sleeper cabin.

So it shouldn't have been unexpected that she would suddenly burst out laughing during a fight.

But with her face swelling from bruises, and with her chest heaving from both laughter and exhaustion, for her to raise her hand to her chest in the Seja way and submit to Rieka—that I had not expected.



## RIEKA

Two of my ribs were broken. It hurt when I breathed. Everyone now thought I was a runaway Celestial Guard. All in all, if that's what this fight resulted in, then I could live with that.

Eleen grunted in pain from the bed beside me. Sal, the train's Organic released her shoulder, having finally popped it back into the socket, and moved to hover her hands over the skin to repair any muscle damage I had caused.

I knew how Organics worked, knew how they could see into your body, locate the damage, and cause your body to do as they told it. I shut my eyes to the sight, willing the shiver that fell over my skin to dissipate.

Fear for a Brute was a terrifying aphrodisiac. And the amount I had smelled coming from Rhydian right before the fight was enough to make any ordinary Brute resort to their hunting instinct. I half expected him to try to stop the fight. But he'd done nothing. He'd just watched the fight. Even now, standing in the entry to *MedCom*, I could feel the heat of Rhydian's eyes as he watched me, his gaze a shadow hanging over my head.

There was a mumble to my right and I realised Eleen had tried to speak but couldn't. I'd broken her jaw.

When Sal attempted to touch her face, Eelen flinched in pain causing the Organic to huff in frustration. "Stop moving Eelen, or this will only take longer."

The Organic effortlessly moved around the Current's bed, towards Eelen's head. Her position entirely obstructed my view, but when she finally stepped away after a few minutes, Eelen's jaw, which had been drooping and lopsided, was straight once more. No indication my foot had ever made contact with it.

As Eelen stretched it a few times, fingers tentatively touching the sensitive areas, the Organic's hands moved to tend to the rest of her face. Which looked somewhat like she had had an allergic reaction to something.

In all likelihood, I was in a similar state.

Lera, the female of the twins I'd seen in *The Bathhouse* and one of Rhydian's Runners, approached my bed. "As per the rules. Eelen submitted. By rights, this now belongs to you. I will now hand over the item to the new owner, do you accept?" She looked over to Eelen who, after a pause, her eyes flicking to me, nodded in agreement.

"You must say the words," Lera said to her friend.

Eelen rolled her eyes. "Yes, I accept."

Lera handed me the leather smoking pouch and the tightness in my chest that had arrived in *The Market* carriage finally vanished. She left without another word and joined Rhydian by the door.

I took a deep breath and opened the clasp. Tiny's fur was still inside. Relief washed over me in waves. I'd done it. I'd fought and reclaimed what was mine. And no one had died because of it.

"I was wrong about you," Eelen said as the Organic finally stepped away, her face once again back to that alabaster complexion.

I held the pouch close to my chest as I lay back in the bed. "I don't really care what you think."

She ignored my response and addressed me again. "Do you know why I took that thing?"

"I suppose you're going to tell me?" I rolled my head to look at her. Eelen was sitting up on the bed, being handed something by the Organic.

“Drink it.”

Eleen downed the green liquid with a grimace before returning her focus to me. “Because the woman who marries Rhydian will become a leader here. And you looked anything but that. I’m glad I was wrong.”

I painfully adjusted myself on the mattress. Eleen evidently wasn’t one to beat around the bush, nor was she inclined to keep these thoughts to herself even with someone present. The Organic had moved over to my bed and had begun her work on my own injuries, raising my arm above my head to gain access to my ribs.

“Am I supposed to take that as a compliment?” The muscle below the Organic’s hands tingled. I tried to concentrate on Eleen instead of the instinct to push the healer away.

Eleen’s shrugged. “I don’t care how you take it. Just know that that is how people see you—Will see you, so long as you live on this train. Rhydian is Kosha’s successor on the council. He will have the most powerful voice when he takes that position. I couldn’t live with myself if I let him become a leader with an ill-equipped wife.”

That was how she justified taking the pouch? How audacious of her to think that Bloodhound needed her help with anything. But perhaps—I’d seen the way she was around Rhydian. It was love, it smelled like it, but sexual desire smelled different to familial care—and romantic love. I hadn’t smelled it at all.

She’d done all this out of concern if I was a good match for him? I scoffed at her answer. “This was a test?” I felt the slightest itch over my healed rib as the Organic moved to my second.

Eleen laughed at me. “Of course it was. You thought I was jealous of the two of you? Rieka, Rhydian is like a brother to me, I’d sooner punch him for being a dick than ever kiss him.”

Her inner voice was more enlightening. ***“Rhydian can chastise me all he wants. If he can send the love of my life on a loyalty-testing mission because he thinks me incapable of choosing a good man, I can challenge your worthiness as his wife.”***

I yelped, the slightest rumble rising from my throat as I felt my ribs pop. “Sorry,” Sal said, withdrawing her fingers from their brief

contact with my skin. "I had to snap the pieces back into place."

I simply hummed in understanding as those fingers started hovering over the rib, the tingling sensation returning once more.

Focused on the sensation of my nails pressing into my palm, I made a much more sensible suggestion to Eelen. "You know you could have just talked to me."

The corners of her mouth perked up. "Where would have been the fun in that?" She stood to leave but was stopped abruptly by Sal, a hand pointing to a second vial on the table beside Eelen. "You know the drill. Two tonics, five minutes apart. You've still got four minutes left."

The Current slumped back onto the bed, eyeing the vial with disdain.

When the Organic had finished tending to the rest of my injuries several minutes later, I was presented with a tonic of my own.

"What is it?" I asked her, memories of ingesting a similarly unknown concoction making me overly cautious.

"A mixture of botanicals to help maintain the healing process," was Sal's answer.

"You didn't mend me completely?"

I'd never met a blind person before. They simply didn't exist in Deos. Organics in the capital volunteered to mend any ailment one had as their civic duty. So long as those ailments fell within certain guidelines of Celestisum. And anyone I'd encountered since leaving—well, the black market was a profitable place for an Organic willing to perform cellshaping. Mending blindness couldn't have been more complicated than mending bone. Surely someone could have tended to her before now?

"I've returned your more immediate injuries to their former states," Sal declared, her voice feathery. "The two broken ribs, the hairline fracture on your cheekbone, and the fracture to your big toe."

That explained why she had hovered a hand over my foot a few minutes ago. She then added, "The tonics will do the rest. The body doesn't react kindly to too much mending at once."

That I knew all too well.



She instructed me to drink it and then consume the other vial five minutes later.

I gulped it down in one go. Frankly, I'd had worse.

With no other option but to wait, I returned my attention to Rhydian who no longer stood alone in the *MedCom* doorway.

A tall man, broad-shouldered, with red hair and beard, stood conversing with him. He was not one of the collarless I'd seen in *The Bathhouse*, nor *The Fight Hall*. I was just determining if I recognised his scent—peaches and parchment—when he turned his head, his gaze roaming over to the Organic.

It was the Pneumatic from my first night abroad. The one who had walked into the sleeper and crushed Bennic's chest. Just standing there, chatting away with Rhydian and Lera, like they knew one another.

"Who is that with Rhydian?" I asked Eelen, keeping my voice curious and not rumbling with the anger I felt.

Eelen followed my gaze. "I see you're still hung up on what he did to your former bunkmate."

My head snapped around to the Current, her expression securitizing me. "Wouldn't you if you were in my situation and no one gave you an explanation?"

Eelen shrugged. "Fair enough. Wade, he's a Runner like Rhydian."

"He's a Runner?"

Eelen indicated to the collar around her neck at my questioning. Wade was indeed collarless, but hadn't he killed Bennic to take it from him? Was that not the custom in this prison?

"Since we were eighteen. The council won't let you go on a supply run until that age. You won't find anyone more loyal to your husband than Wade." She made sure to emphasise that last part.

"That doesn't endear him to me," I assured her.

"I wasn't trying to." She shifted on the bed, the springs in the mattress creaking under her weight. "You barely knew the guy he took the collar from."

I cut her off. "Killed. Wade killed Bennic for his collar." I returned my focus to the murderer. "He isn't even wearing it, why go to all that trouble and not even wear it."

"Would you give up your bodily autonomy so easily?"

Her question was not one I could answer aloud. Ever.

She took the second vial from the table and downed it. Wiping her lips with the back of her hand, she added, "When you've lived your whole life confined to this place, those collars look like freedom. No one has the words to explain what that freedom costs."

My eyes fell to the collar around her neck, the chaffing scars where the metal rested on her skin. Part of me was curious why she never asked Sal to mend them, but not curious enough to ask. "You were born on the train?" I'd assumed she was like me, forced to be here.

"As soon as I turned sixteen, I claimed one. It was the only way I was allowed to kill the Hunters who killed my mother."

Her expression, the sadness her eyes held was not that of one who was pleased with their choice.

"Do you regret it?"

"Killing the Hunters? No. I'm not a patient person as you can tell, and Currents—we tend to have tempest tempers. But had I waited two more years, I would have chosen to become a Runner and I would have likely achieved the same goal."

I mulled over what she'd said, the details she'd divulged, the past she'd admitted about herself, the weakness she'd revealed. This woman was trusting me with these truths. Why?

Concluding she couldn't say much else to me, Eleen finally stood from the cot to leave. However, she stopped upon reaching the foot of my bed. "If you're thinking about retribution for your dead friend, I wouldn't bother." She glanced over her shoulder at her friends, at Bennic's murderer. "The council is already deliberating his punishment."

"I thought Runners were allowed to claim collars?" I indicated to the one around her neck.

Eleen shook her head. "Regular passengers yes. Any collarless passenger over the age of sixteen who chooses to stay aboard the train can attempt to claim a collar. Like I did. But a Runner—To this day, the one-hundred-and-thirty that are still alive on the train have

sworn an oath to the council to never claim one. Their duty is to the preservation of life."

I stared over at the tall redhead who looked so unlike the violent man from that night and spoke my realisation aloud. "And Wade broke that vow."

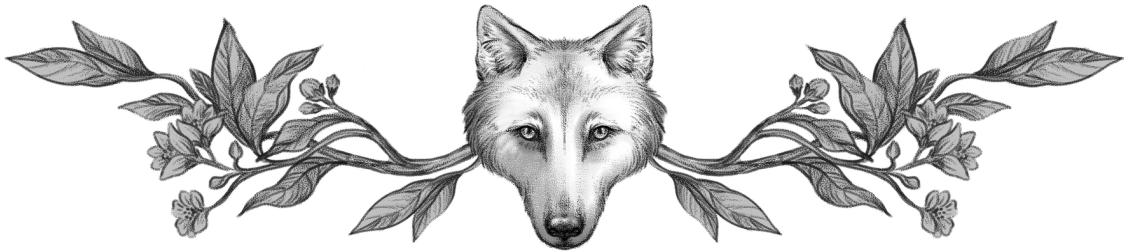
*2000 passengers. Over 500 collarless. 200 of them children. And only 130 who have sworn to protect...everyone.*

"You said *their duty*, are you not a Runner too?" I asked, realising that of all the Runners I had met, she was the only one in a collar.

Eleen smiled cockily. "I didn't give them a choice."

Unable to reconcile the man who had sworn to protect life and the one who crushed a man to death with the air, I found myself asking, "Do you know why he did it?"

"Yes" was what she said aloud. But the voice in her head responded with more force. **"Stay out of my head, T'eiryash."**



## RIEKA

I'd had every intention of confronting Wade. It may have been the adrenaline from the fight, perhaps Eleen's words had fuelled the fire instead of quenching it. But I wasn't going to rest this day without knowing the truth about why he'd killed Bennic.

S'vara came to check up on me just as I downed the tonic. I managed to convince her that I wanted to avoid the questions the others would undoubtedly have of my newly revealed fighting skills, at least for the next hour or so. And not wanting to be disturbed further, I pretended to fall asleep soon after, using my senses to inform me when Wade left. I'd been prepared to sneak out of *MedCom* and follow Rhydian and the others, expecting Wade to accompany them.

However, when Rhydian departed the carriage, Wade remained behind.

I waited twenty minutes before his scent and that of the Organic left *MedCom* together and headed towards the back of the train, through *The Communal Sleepers*.

Since arriving on this train, at times it had reminded me of home. An odd thought given the circumstances of my arrival. As my father had been a member of the warrior caste, our position within society

meant a home would always be provided to one willing to serve the Celestial Offices.

The Borough with its narrow terrace houses, and roof landing ports, packed together like a deck of playing cards had always been a comfort. One always knew one's neighbours. Morning promenades, even for warriors always consisted of the spouses and their children taking the long walk to Worship Square, where prayer wasn't the only topic of conversation. It had been a world unto itself, bustling with life entirely devoted to preserving their community in a world where the rest of the castes saw us as nothing more than glorified bodyguards. Since leaving Deos, I'd avoided thinking of the Borough entirely.

The scent of leather and sweat milling about the sleepers reminded me of the men and women who'd returned from the barracks in the evenings, and the sound of mothers singing lullabies to their children. The sheer amount of so many Blessed in one place was comforting.

Nowhere I'd been in the last two years had truly encapsulated the scent of home until here. In this prison.

I passed all the way through the sleepers before picking up Wade's scent in the last passageway. Access through the *Water Storage Tanks* was only possible through the upper floor passage where a tunnel stretched through the next two carriages.

I slowed my pace, Wade's scent thick in the hollow tunnel and having not been this far down the train before I didn't know what I would find on the other side of the doors.

There was a metal plate by the door written in what looked like Kensillan. Which I could still not read. However, beneath that, someone had translated it several times, some written in ink, others had been scratched into the plate. One was my native tongue. Someone had scratched out the words '**Water Filtration**' and written another word.

*Pipe Room.*

I tread lightly as I entered the carriage.

It was a singular carriage with a lone walkway—a bridge really—that ran straight across. Further dividing the space were three

horizontal paths that each led to some type of tech station at their respective walls. I peeked over the steel railing and found pipes below. A lot of pipes.

At the furthest cross-section of the walkway stood two figures, one was Wade, and the other surprisingly was Sal. Not wanting to be detected, hoping the momentum of the train didn't affect the airflow in the compartment and allow the Pneumatic to sense my presence, I quickly climbed over the rail and lowered myself down onto the pipes in utter silence.

There were hundreds of these pipes, all different sizes creating a maze work of copper all centralised around a large rumbling machine.

Overhead, the steel bridge stretched between the second-floor entries. I kept myself beneath it, weaving through the pipes until I was directly under Sal and Wade's scents. I looked up and found myself staring straight into Sal's eyes. I slammed my hand over my mouth so fast to hush my gasp, that I broke skin against my teeth. It took me a moment to remember those green eyes, Sal's eyes, could not see me.

I kept quiet, moving to my tiptoes to silence my movement, sticking close to the pipes, hoping the shadows kept me hidden. The rumble of the machine was my only protection against the blessing of the Pneumatic above. It wasn't the ideal situation. The amount of interference I was getting from the machine meant I'd have to put all my concentration into my hearing, leaving my other senses vulnerable. I just had to hope no one caught me hiding down here.

I doubted I would be able to understand more than a few words of their conversation, Seja being the soup bowl language that it was. All I could hope was that I understood enough.

It was just my luck that Sal chose to speak in Old Prean instead. "When will they make their decision?"

I peered up to find the dark-haired medic still leaning on the bridge's rail. Wade leaned into her, his frame overwhelmingly large in comparison to the petite mender.

"Another week maybe." It was the first time I'd heard him speak. I'd imagined some thick grizzly, almost cold voice. Not the gentle

demeanour or the soft silvery tone. He too spoke in Old Preat, rather than Seja.

Sal reciprocated the contact and turned into his body. "You just had to be the first didn't you," she said affectionally, sliding a hand up his broad chest where it came to rest on the bare skin of his neck, her fingers tracing the line of a phantom collar. "You know the Covenant is there for a reason, you big idiot."

The Covenant. *Could that be the oath Eelen was talking about?*

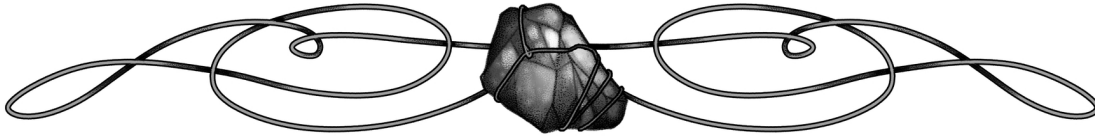
Wade took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. "I told you already Salryah, I don't regret killing him. That Charmer deserved what he got. I just regret it didn't last longer."

My stomach twisted.

I couldn't decide what shocked me more, that the Organic, Sal, was romantically involved with Wade, or that Bennic was a Charmer.

I had no time to decide my next course of action. Several pairs of boots connected with the steel of the overhead bridge, followed by a voice that made my body instantly tense up.

"Good, you're both here already."



## RHYDIAN

"You look pissed, why are you pissed?" Wade noted when we reached him on the bridge.

"I distinctly heard *the* tone," Sal added.

"There was no tone," I assured her as the rest of my men joined the meeting. I was loath to call them my Generals but when their use of my title had turned from joking to serious, it had become a kind of tactic. A reason to give our enemy pause before striking. If we shared the same titles as the Kensillans, perhaps they would take us seriously as a threat.

But right now, they were making my job as their leader much harder. When we were young, they used to expect me to announce the start of the Resistance Leadership meetings, as though it made our efforts official somehow. Now all it took was for Jordry and Mal to close the doors to the carriage and I would have ten sets of eyes on me awaiting orders. No, nine eyes...

"Where's Anika?" I asked them.

Sal leaned into Wade, taking his hand in hers. "See there is that tone again. You're definitely pissed about something." Sometimes I resented her ability to read me. There wasn't much that she didn't notice.



Simon, who sat atop the rail to stretch his multi-coloured wings over the edge, answered. "Anika has school, I'll fill her in later."

"So why are we here boss?" I looked over at my reconnaissance officer and found her once again in a sorry state. Amida sat atop the opposite rail, her purple hair twisted atop her head in such an uncharacteristic way, with dark circles under her eyes, and lounging against her husband's back, her arms draped over his shoulders. Jordry caught the sympathetic way I looked at his wife and squeezed one of her hands, both of us knowing that our mission was becoming more important by the day.

Unlike most Brutes, Alatus need open space to thrive, and when they don't get it, their bodies suffer a melancholy that their minds don't. Historically on the Kensillan Territory Rail, it shouldn't happen for decades—Thralls at least get government-mandated recreation time to prevent this occurring—but since her sister's death, and her refusal to be anywhere that Jordry wasn't had caused it to strike Amida early. She would last another year before her muscles would begin to atrophy.

I cleared my throat to address them but found myself cut off by Eelen. "I hope it would be because you have changed your mind about my proposition?"

Mal, Si'mon's Growler husband and the best of my fighters was startled by this statement. "One fight does not constitute proof of conception Eelen, regardless of how skilled the fighter may be."

"I will admit, there are merits to the proposition now that did not exist this morning." I snapped my focus to the speaker. Lera, who was usually my most stringent ally, was not someone who I expected to take Eelen's side. They'd been friends for decades, and they would kill for one another, but I'd never heard them agree on a single thing, not even the time of day. She would much rather spend time with Sal, who *was* her best friend, and whom she now shared the same expression with as they stood beside one another staring at me. They thought I was being unreasonable.

I tried to contain my frustration as I spoke. "There are no merits to it."

"You're the one who said we were running out of time," Eelen snapped back bitterly.

"Not that you'll tell us why," Amida mumbled under her breath, her wings fluttering behind her, a sure sign she needed to get into the open air soon.

Eelen gripped the rail before her tightly, her knuckles turning white as the water in the pipes below us began to rumble louder. "I just don't understand why you won't see reason."

"BECAUSE SHE IS MY WIFE!"

I'd raised my voice at Eelen, something I had never done. But it hadn't deterred her. As strong as a river she shouted back.

"And she's a T'eiryash! You told us. She killed the hunter. Inside a Void Trap. Her taint is not inhibited like ours are," she said, indicating to the other members of the circle. "All that is Steady, Rhydian. She speaks the language of the fucking gods. She is the answer."

I knew Eelen was right. But I just couldn't bring myself to agree with her. I remained silent, which only made Eelen grumble at me in further frustration, pacing down the walk bridge.

I stared around at all their faces, realising that the expressions I was seeing were resolve.

"You all feel this way?" Eight hands beat over their chests in the Seja way. "Yes," they said.

The one person who didn't answer was Lex, Lera's twin brother. He usually kept his opinions to himself since he'd been part of the ground contingent of the Resistance. Whilst his sister had chosen to remain on the train when they were sixteen, he'd chosen to leave to join Filora and her Runners outside the train. "And what about you, do you feel the same, that my wife should join the resistance?"

The young Skin Weaver was more expressive than his sister. "In all honesty boss, if your wife truly is a T'eiryash. I'd let her bespell me into a rat if it meant getting off this godsdamned train." He then paused. "Rieka is invaluable, Rhydian, and I know Filora would agree with me."

Jordry, ever the voice of reason in the group, stepped forward, though his hand never left Amida's. "I get that she's your wife, and considering you two have only been reunited for a few days—you're

not willing to put her life at risk. But we all saw her fight. She is not helpless, Rhydian."

"Exactly," Eleen added, re-joining the group at our tactician's words. "We can take her on the next supply run, test out her capab \_\_\_"

"Absolutely not!" I flatly refused to even entertain the idea of Rieka leaving the train. It was an insane idea.

"I'll do it."

Everybody on the platform went into a state of alert at the sound of her voice. I rushed to the rail. Standing in the shadows of the bridge looking up at us, with a look of determination on her face was Rieka. "What are you doing here?" I asked as she approached the pipes of the machine below.

"Exploring my new home." It had to be a lie. She had no reason to be this far down the train. Rieka climbed atop the pipes, stood, and climbed higher, jumping when she could reach the bridge then hauled herself up and over the rail. She was still dressed in the clothes she'd fought in. Her feet were bare and soot-covered—how long had she been down there?

With a determined look in her eye, she attempted to push past me into the circle. I grabbed her to stop her from entering, to hold her in place outside the group. I instantly regretted my actions, but not why. It was too damn dangerous. I knew the second her hand began to wriggle in my grasp that I had committed a trespass, but I just could not let her go. Grateful for this talent of hers, I spoke to her silently once again, *"No, why are you here, in this carriage?"*

Her eyes flicked over to Wade momentarily. Whether she meant to reveal that much I don't know. Wade certainly hadn't expected anyone to react the way Rieka had to his collar claiming, but judging by the way he'd positioned his body, blocking Rieka's path to Sal, he certainly wasn't taking anything regarding my "wife" lightly.

Rieka closed her free hand over mine, those icy greys holding my gaze contemptuously. "I want to help. Why won't you let me?" Her tone felt wrong, caring. Adoring. Her inner voice, on the other hand, its tone matched the gaze. ***"You're the one who told me to see my own worth."***

I looked around at my friends, at the Runners who I trusted with my life, with the lives of every passenger on this train. And I looked to Rieka. How *could* I trust her?

"Am I still your leader?" I asked them without taking my eyes off hers.

"Of course."

"Always."

Sentiments shared by all of them.

I lingered on Rieka a moment longer than was probably necessary. There was something in her eyes that held my gaze, some desperate plea that I doubted even she knew was there. I gave my order. "My answer is no."

With her wrist still in my hand we left, Rieka making no attempt to stay.

I pulled her into *Confinement Cells* two carriages over, led her into the last cell and released her. She spun to face me, as though expecting some kind of attack on my part, instead finding me standing inches from her, my hands braced on the wall on either side of her head. Confined in the cage that my body had formed, she raised her chin. Defiantly. ***"Planning on locking me up, husband?"***

I knew she meant the cell, and if I was honest the thought had occurred to me. It would be easier. But she'd already garnered a reputation for herself. My "wife" suddenly being locked in the cells would arouse too many questions.

I regarded her face. That expression remained unyielding and perhaps a little warranted. Her lips pressed into a hard line, instantly drawing my eye. A tightness rose in my chest. An urge I couldn't shake to press my mouth to hers in an attempt to shut her up, silencing both her voices if only for a moment.

This woman, who was as infuriating as she was beautiful, had a bounty on her head so priceless that I'd been allowed to ask for anything in return for her retrieval. Someone who knew what she had done, what she was, what she was capable of wanted her caught alive. No one since the Fall had held the title God Killer. That name was as infamous as T'eiryash was. Someone capable of killing

a god—They could be a mighty prize to the one in possession. Or a dangerous war-igniting weapon.

Rieka's breath escaped her in a hurried rush, a single lock of her hair billowing as she exhaled. The strands had fallen from the braid that encircled her head like a crown, the white wisps, the roots black for no more than a few days fallen like silk threads across her brow. Her bust, wrapped in nothing but that shirt, rose and fell in an intoxicating motion as she breathed heavily. Those lips held in a daring snarl. Lips that were pink and full. And soft—the memory of a kiss by a hearth resurfaced.

I pushed off the wall with a groan, stepping aside. Slowly Rieka peeled herself from the wall. She kept her eyes on me as she took a step towards the door. When I didn't move to stop her again, she stepped over the threshold. I finally found my voice as her dangerous figure silhouetted the doorway.

*"These people are my family Rieka. I'll protect them with my life. Whatever you were planning on doing back there, forget about it. I'll kill you before you ever hurt them."*

Lingering on the door's precipice, her back towards me, the curves of her body on full and deadly display, Rieka replied. **"I guess I'm not that important after all, or would the buyer accept a dead slave instead of a living one."** Then aloud she added, "Find somewhere else to sleep tonight. I'm sure that family of yours will be able to accommodate you."

Within the hour, the train thought we were having a lover's fight.



When I turned up to training the following morning, having slept on the sofa in my room, Rieka wasn't there. She had chosen to avoid the class entirely. And due to some sense of morality I held when it came to this woman, I couldn't bring myself to track her with the

arrowhead—even if I did carry it around in my pocket—I'd been forced to search for her on foot.

After training, I went to *The Bathhouse*, but Anika informed me that Rieka had changed back to the original work roster. She was working the laundry shift. To make certain, knowing she would have to come to *The Bathhouse* to collect the towel trolley, I stayed in the pool for over an hour, my skin pruning as I waited for her to show.

It was midday when she walked into *The Bathhouse*. Once again she ignored me, fuelling the gossip fire. And it wasn't like she didn't see me in the bath. She walked a full circuit of the pool checking no towel had been missed, and she stopped right in front of me, picking up my dry fresh towel from the edge of the pool and deposited it in the trolley. She said nothing to me. Neither aloud nor in my head. Then she left just as nonchalantly as she had arrived.

Jordry who had waited with me patiently, his brown curls frizzing due to how long his loyalty had kept him here said, "And you're certain she'd never been this mad at you before?"

"I'm sure," I told him. Obvious reasons aside, we hadn't been around each other long enough for there to be something to be mad about. We knew nothing about one another except what had transpired between us this last week. And those circumstances were not exactly ideal for getting to know one's fake wife. And the little I did know of her, I could count on one hand. And that was exactly why I couldn't say yes to Eleen's suggestion. I would be trusting their lives and the lives of everyone on the train to a woman who wanted nothing more than her own freedom.

It might sound like those two things aligned, we all wanted to be free of this place. But every one of the Runners would die for one another to achieve that goal. I didn't even know Rieka's real name. How was I supposed to trust her with something as important as a supply run?

I didn't see her again until the evening meal. I was sitting with the twins discussing the latest intelligence Jonah had provided, the files turned over before we'd left the cave in the Deadwood.

Gala and Amida, best friends for the last twenty-one years, sat opposite us eagerly chatting away over the baked goods on their

plates. To their left Si'mon, whose tone was one of disbelief asked, "And the council just let her make them?"

"Mmhm," Gala hummed with a mouth full of food. "Lily told them sweets would boost the train's morale after the Hunt, so they let Rieka use the leftover flour and stuff."

I dared to look across the table, the smell of sugared pastry finally too hard to ignore. A slice of pie, already half eaten, sat on the petite blonde's plate. Another slice sat in Amida's who was happily feeding spoonsful to Jordry as he looked over the mission files.

Gala looked up at me, a crumbed smile on her small face. "Aren't you going to get one Rhydian? I'm sure Rieka's saved one for you."

"I did hear she only made a couple dozen. So it was first in first served," Amida added with a knowing smile, sweeping a strand of purple hair behind her ear. Being a sweet tooth connoisseur herself, she knew exactly how I felt about baked goods.

I looked around and found several tables had obtained slices of pie and were sharing them amongst themselves, ensuring everyone got a taste. Gala was either lucky she got a slice for herself, or she'd nicked it without anyone seeing. A handy skill under any other circumstances.

I contemplated for a moment. Mal offered me a sympathetic smile as I looked over to the serving trollies where a line of passengers was still waiting. The sliver of hope I'd held that this façade of hers reached my stomach, vanished when I arrived at the trolley and Lily informed me that the last piece was just claimed.

Damn Gala and her contagious optimism.

I returned to the table in silence. My mood was enough to keep their comments to themselves.

"May I join you?" I looked up from the map a few minutes later to find Rieka standing at the table.

Any words I had for her, any cocky retort fled the moment I took in her appearance. There wasn't anything special about it. She was still dressed in her kitchen apron, her long white hair was plated down her back, and she was once again wearing her gloves. She looked—and I sensed from her blood—quite exhausted. Yet the smile on her face as she examined all the empty plates on the table

was one I'd only ever seen once before. When she noticed Gala wiping her plate clean with her fingers she turned her head.

She had flour dusting the edge of her jaw. I almost reached across the table to wipe it off. *Oh steady, what is this woman doing to me?*

When no one objected to her joining us, Rieka sat down beside Mal. As she did she placed down a plate. With a slice of pie on it.

My mouth began to salivate. The scent of golden butter-baked pastry filled my nostrils, the smell of something dark and sweet beneath it.

She pulled a spoon out from the front pocket of her apron and cut into the pie. As she brought it to her mouth, her eyes caught my gaze and she paused, eyes glancing down to the contents of her spoon.

"You won't eat this," she said with a soft smile. "You don't like strawberries."

She languished in the taste of the pie as my friends tried to contain their amusement at my expense. Rieka had no intention of playing the dutiful wife. She was going to make this as hard for me as she could.

"*You're being petty,*" I told her across the silence of our minds.

She took in another mouthful; her face entirely void of any devious intentions as she stared at me. **"Can't imagine why you would think that,"** she responded in a playful tone that was as enticing as that damn slice of pie.

After the fifth bite, I couldn't take it anymore. I stood abruptly, startling everyone but Rieka. "I'll see you at one-on-one training later." Before I could leave she replied, "No" then ate the last mouthful of pie.

My inner voice reiterated. *"Condition #2, remember."*

She slowly licked the spoon, watching me from over those long, almost iridescent lashes. **"Revocable on being able to defend against Eleen in a hand-to-hand fight. Consider that condition met."**

I clenched my jaw. Rieka wasn't seducing me. She was simply adding to the list of reasons why I'd never choose her.



I'd marched three steps from the table, wanting to put as much distance between the two of us as possible when the alarm whaled. Every heartbeat in the mess instantly increased, the blood pressure of the room elevating to fear levels.

Silently, two thousand passengers began to count and I found myself looking at Rieka. She had a powerful taint, but that taint couldn't wash away the trauma of what the Hunt had made her do. The look in her eyes told me enough. She dreaded being selected again.

So I counted with her. *"Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten."*

Her collar remained, for all intents and purposes, dead. Relief and colour returned to her features.

"Rieka!"

A desperate and angry voice, one on the verge of hysterics moved towards our table. The redheaded she-wolf marched to a stop before Rieka, the blue glow from the collar around her neck turning her dark features into a ghostly grey.

"S'vara," Rieka said in an anguished fearful tone. But her bunkmates' features were not fearful, they were determined. And searching. She surveyed the Runners halting abruptly when she saw me. S'vara climbed right over the table and stood before me. "Ree tells me the best way to survive is in pairs, is that true?"

I returned my gaze to Rieka who was startled to see another of her bunkmates approach. The sun-kissed Drake's collar was aglow, his face a false calm I'd seen on many a man before their first Hunt. Some even their tenth.

From across the table, she spoke to me, her inner voice pleading.  
***"Please help them."***



Silence filled the train like fog. A heaviness laced the goodbyes and desperate pleas for reunions that may never come. It was the hour after a Hunt had commenced. When passengers tried and failed to sleep, when their bodies refused the call of fatigue. It was the only time of day, of any day when the train was quiet.

Twenty-four hours. That was how long a full rotation of the train took. Twenty-four hours, give or take a few minutes when the rail would circle back around to the same station. That was when Rieka and her bunkmates would know if their friends survived the Hunt. If they made it back to the platform.

I'd told S'vara and Farox, the Drake as much as I could. I answered any question they asked me in the limited time we had, and Rieka, much to my surprise had looked thankful. Perhaps that was why I'd chosen the seclusion of the bunks where she would return to instead of sleeping in my office.

Tira, the teenage Terrestrial was the first to return. I got the distinct impression she intended on climbing into Rieka's bunk until she saw I was within. She proceeded to then crawl into the bunk she shared with S'vara, the sound of sniffles coming from the space for several minutes as she petted the stray tabby that slept on her bunk.

Rieka arrived with the men nearly an hour later. If they were surprised to see me in her bunk, they kept it to themselves. She paused when she saw me, her eyes trailing my figure as I lay there in the bunk. I expected her to tell me to leave. I honestly would have if she'd asked me. Too many of my friends' lives had been lost to the Hunt. I'd understand if she didn't want me anywhere near her right now. But I'd declared myself her husband. This is where I was expected to be.

As though some decision had been made, Rieka began untying her buckskin, her apron gone. "Can you pass me that?" She indicated to the shirt folded at the end of the bunk. My shirt. Because obviously why wouldn't my "wife" wear one of my shirts to bed.

I held onto it as she stripped off her blouse and singlet, her nipples hardening in the chill of the cabin air. My shirt, once on her slight frame fell well below her knees, the material flush against her pert breasts. Rieka rolled up the sleeves just enough that her hands

showed and then she climbed into the bunk beside me in silence, unfurling the blanket at our feet and pulling it over herself.

After what felt like an hour of just listening to her breath, convincing myself she was asleep, her voice cut through the silence. "Thank you."

I knew she was talking about her friends. "I'd have done it for anyone." It wasn't an entirely true statement. But when she had asked me, the desperation I saw in her face—

I shifted trying to get more comfortable and noticed a shadow block the light of the window. Tira stood awkwardly in the middle of the alcove, chewing on her bottom lip and looking down at myself and Rieka in our bunk.

"Are you all right?" I asked her. She remained silent, nibbling a little harsher on her lip.

***"She wanted to sleep with me tonight since S'vara's on the Hunt,"*** Rieka's inner voice informed me. ***"Members of her commune sleep in groups so she doesn't like sleeping alone."***

*"I'll leave."* But instead of agreeing with me, Rieka invited Tira into the bunk between us. The young Terrestrial climbed around me and snuggled under the blanket, nuzzling into Rieka's side. I looked at the horns still on her head, at the jagged way in which they had been cut. As though she had pulled the words right out of my head, Rieka's inner voice found the need to comment. ***"Don't worry, Tira sleeps like the dead. You won't get stabbed in your sleep."*** She paused before adding with a smirk, ***"Not by her at least."***

I stared up at the bunk ceiling where someone, a former passenger perhaps had begun to etch tallies into the metal, counting the days they had been aboard perhaps, or more likely, the lives that had been taken since arriving. *"Who gave it to you, that blade you carry in your boot?"*

I expected her to tell me to mind my own business, but she didn't. ***"That friend I told you about. I received it after her death."*** I turned my head to look at her, my eyes skimming the curve of her neck where the collar rested. Where her scar was.

Using my arm to rest on, I rolled on my side to look at her. Tira must have assumed I was cold because she wriggled from her position to adjust the blanket and draped it over my legs before returning to sleep.

Rieka smiled down at the girl as she too took the opportunity to get more comfortable, choosing a position not dissimilar to my own.

*"Was that friend the one who taught you how to use it?"*

Nonchalantly Rieka unfurled her arm from beneath her head and draped it across the pillow where she began playing with the fabric of my shirt. The shirt on *my* body, rubbing and pressing it between two long fingers. She shifted to rest her chin on her shoulder, giving no pained indication of the injury it had recently sustained. I let her make the contact. Some chivalrous part left in me by my father told me it was what she needed at that moment.

Rieka took a deep breath, eyes still focused on my shirt as she spoke. ***"My father is in the Celestial Guard. An Apex Brute. Wolf-Blessed. I used to visit his barracks as a child and watch the guards train on the obstacle courses. Watch my father run them."***

***"One night when we visited, I snuck out to try it. He caught me after I fell from the rope wall. I didn't have enough strength in my arms then. My father took pity on me. My blessing wasn't presenting as it should have at that age, but he thought perhaps training me as he did the cadets might help me control it. Knife work was one of the first things he taught me."***

*"But it hasn't anything to do with your tai—"* I corrected myself, using the word familiar to her. *"With your blessing."*

Her fingers paused their motion, and I found those ghostly greys looking upon my face with something I couldn't quite place. Curiosity perhaps. ***"I'd been having issues keeping Gods' Tongue from slipping out since I'd grown frustrated with my inability to control my blessing, he thought knife training would teach me discipline. He'd said 'Better to defend yourself with a blade than die without one'"*** her inner voice said, almost happily.

*"So you were a guard for the Celestial Offices?"*

The Deogn Ecclesiarchy were thought to be quite selective when it came to their choice of warriors. Especially when those warriors would be serving both the Priesthood and The Celestials. The Guard were said to have perfect precision control over their taints. Able to make split-second decisions. And except for certain leadership positions held by humans, my understanding was that they were all Brutes. It would explain how Rieka had gotten close enough to a god to kill one.

***"My father trained me for the guard until I was fifteen,"*** she continued quite casually. ***"I was assigned a non-violent vocation for my Civic Duty and I apprenticed under my mother in our family bakery after that. She taught me how to wield eggs and butter like my father did claws and steel."***

I raised a brow in disbelief. *"Eggs and butter as a weapon?"*

She quirked a brow of her own. ***"I recall only a few hours ago that pretty face of yours had turned quite sour because I'd withheld pie."***

My inner voice failed to hide its amusement. *"Oh."* I nodded. *"That kind of weapon."*

***"My mother always said, food is the path to a man's heart, but pastry is the path to his mind."*** The comment reminded me so much of my mother that I couldn't help but chuckle. It caught me off guard. I rolled back over, the movement removing her hands from my shirt. The sudden lack of contact was a strained sort of discomfort.

*"You should get some sleep. Being sleep-deprived won't help them."*

***"And what will?"*** she asked mournfully.

*"Turning up for morning training."* Rieka's inner voice groaned at that response. *"You agreed to the conditions, wife."* I emphasised the word to remind her of our deal.

*"Come to think of it,"* I rolled back around to look at her. ***"Condition #3. Should I require any information about you, to alleviate any suspicions others might have about our relationship, you will provide me with a true and honest answer."***

Rieka's eyes narrowed, her lips pursing in annoyance. ***"Fine. So long as you do the same for me."***

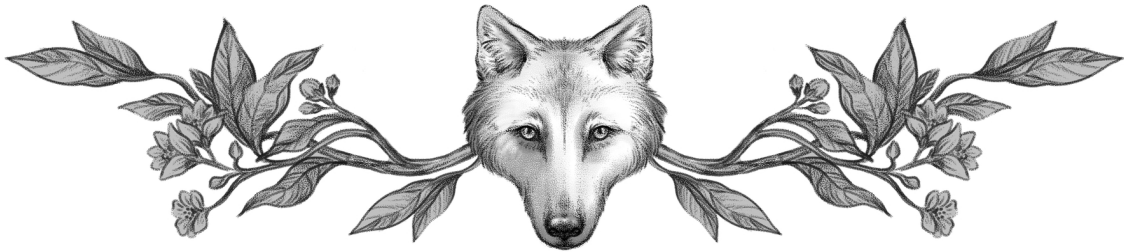
But I couldn't do that. Not when she was going to be leaving the train eventually. I couldn't let certain information leave the train with her, not with so many lives at stake. So I said, *"Only questions we're willing to answer."* When she opened her mouth to object, I quickly added, *"And for any question you refuse to answer you have to spend an hour training with me after evening meal."*

The corners of her mouth perked up. ***"OK. For every question you refuse to answer, I get to bathe in that tub."***

Lily's tub? I couldn't agree to that. Pregnant Lily was terrifying when she didn't have her tea baths, I couldn't imagine what angry pregnant Lily would do to me if I commandeered her tub for the sake of my wife. Rieka's expression said she wasn't letting this one go.

I grumbled out my agreement to her terms.

I would have to figure something out.



## RIEKA

*132 days until Marian 1st*

S'vara and Farox were the last passengers to reboard the train from the Hunt. The circumstances as to their late boarding were on account of the five supply caches they dragged with them.

That night our little group learned that the she-wolf born from the seaport city of Igran, had a metal jaw. Later that week we'd learn it was from a boating accident when some rigging had snapped and ripped off her lower jaw, leaving the only mending an Organic could do was regrow the skin and muscle over the steel the bone had been replaced with. In the Hunt, a Hunter had attempted to shoot S'vara in the face with a gun, a word and weapon new to me. The bullets, buckshot someone had called them, had destroyed all the skin on her chin.

She'd been mended in hours, but it had given new meaning to the term "Steel Jaw." According to Farox, she had used it to rip off the

Hunter's hand. S'vara had spent the rest of the night poking her new skin to ensure sensation had returned to every part.

As it turned out Rhydian had been right about the Kensillans. Over the next three weeks, my bunkmates were drawn for the Hunt. Rules dictated that the train wouldn't receive their ration shipment unless they survived a Hunt. The drawings were random. No one knew why S'vara and Farox's Hunt was drawn two days after my own, but the Hunt that chose Hentirion and Emil was not till six days later. They were gone for two days. And Tira had been drawn alone the very night they had returned. No one could fathom why the Hunts were being drawn so close together, but I had my suspicions it had something to do with me. And what I'd done to that slave camp.

The worry lines I'd begun to see on Lily's face during dinner preparations gave me some indication as to the consequences of so many Hunts in such a short amount of time.

The train was running out of rations. The regular shipments courtesy of our wardens were still arriving. The train would slow down every five days, though it wouldn't stop. The passengers would wait in *The Fight Hall* for the glass panel in the roof to open. A single drone, a Kensillan piece of technology that looked like a metal cigar with wings would then hover over the hole and deliver a heavy supply of large crates.

Wade and a few other Pneumatics were required to unstack the large crates as they would be delivered stacked on top of one another. Then Lily and a couple of members of the council would catalogue the items before they were allotted to the carriages. These supplies were the bare minimum. There was not enough to accommodate the number of passengers aboard. The supply drops never included rations for the hundreds of collarless passengers. They did not account for the two hundred children onboard.

Two weeks on kitchen duty with Lily, and even she couldn't withhold the fact the stock in the storage rooms was dwindling fast.

The train's mourning celebration upon Tira and her Hunt's return was small. It had only been a day since Hentirion and Emil had returned, and even then, the extra supplies had been low. And as much as I hated him, I could see the worry begin to show in



Rhydian. It showed in the lines of his face as he slept. It was the only time it showed.

Morale had significantly lowered amongst the passengers. Sex and alcohol had become a much more frequent pastime. The sight of Saska and Emil sleeping together had become such a normal occurrence that Hentirion had moved into Farox's bunk.

When people weren't in *The Cantina* dulling their fears with Tollen's homebrew, they were seeking the entertainment of *The Theatre*, where passengers would not only tell stories, but they would perform exaggerated re-enactments of moments in their lives, much to the other passengers' amusements.

Whilst it wasn't like baking, since I didn't have the control I really wanted, I had kitchen work to keep me occupied. The others had fighting. It was all Saska and Farox seemed to do aside from having sex, the Drake finding himself welcome in several bunks on the train. More than half their free time was spent sparring with the Runners who seemed to favour this past time as well.

They spent all their other time in hushed meetings with Rhydian, likely discussing the supply runs that seemed to come up short if *The Kitchen* inventory lists were to be believed.

And when the Runners weren't doing that, they were volunteering for the Hunts that just kept being drawn, attempting to get as many passengers and their supplies back on the train. Killing as many Hunters as they could in the process.

They truly were invisible to the *Eyes* as Ghena had called the Kensillan government.

But I'd started to suspect there were other Runners, ones who didn't live on the train. Whenever the train would slow for supply drops, there would be a new collarless passenger at their table at twelfth-hour meal, and one whose scent I didn't even recognise in passing. They would be gone a few hours later.

I'd wanted to use his *Condition #3* to get the answers. So for a while, I indulged in his curiosity and asked him the same questions he asked me.

What were our likes and dislikes? What were our favourite foods, our ages? He'd thought my being twenty-two was a stretch. I'd

commented that I couldn't help it if the gods blessed me with great skin.

I even had a few of my own.

*"Why the red leather jacket?"*

***"It was my father's."***

*"Do you carry any weapons?"*

***"Just the hairpin."***

*"Your father's too?"*

***"Mother's. Alchemist steel. It never dulls"***

*"Who on the train knows you're a Homeopath?"*

***"Grandfather, Lily, Jae and Sal."***

*"How have you kept it a secret for 24 years?"*

***"I'm a marvellous actor."***

*"Who is my buyer?"*

He refused to answer that one. A refusal that garnered me one night in the tub. Though he hadn't yet fulfilled that part of the condition. I'd proceeded to ask it four more times that week causing him to amend the Condition.

**A QUESTION CANNOT BE ASKED MORE THAN ONCE IF REFUSED.**

So, I'd resorted to asking around my initial question. What was the buyer's name? Did they have an accent? What language did you converse in? What did the buyer look like? Where can I find them?

I'd garnered a week's worth of tub time and finally came to the annoying conclusion that Rhydian had no intention of telling me anything about the individual who wanted to purchase me. I was no better than a pair of shoes or a new coat.

And my task of making the man fall in love with me was becoming more difficult. Rhydian had started leaving the train for days at a time, using the Hunts as an excuse to sneak off the train, cutting the time I could spend with him in half. When I'd asked him to tell me where he was going, using Condition #3 as the excuse, he'd told me it was Runner business and therefore none of mine.

I'd tried to get the answer out of his Runners whenever we'd cross paths, but they'd leave faster than I could open my mouth. In Rhydian's absences, they'd been ordered to avoid me. Likely because they couldn't keep their thoughts from me.

The twins, Lex and Lera quoted Old Preat riddles whenever they were around me. Lily would recite recipes and Jae, poetry. Mal, the Bear-Blessed Brute would sing romantic ballads whilst Amida, the purple-haired Sylph with the dragonfly wings, chose to sing drinking songs in her head whenever she was around me.

Eleen was the only one who seemed even comfortable in my presence without Rhydian. And her thoughts never even lingered on me long enough to garner my attention. She thought of two topics in my presence, my ability to bespell and how that was related to my being a T'eiryash, and the changing state of my hair—over the last few weeks my roots had started returning to their natural black.

My only recourse had been morning training sessions. The Runners' mistake had been to allow passengers to pick their sparring partners. I had chosen one of Rhydian's Runners four out of five times.

The sessions quickly turned to frustration on my part. They were taking it easy on me. And what I thought was going to be my way of compelling the answers I needed out of them, turned into a useless quest for respect. Which had surprised me.

My patience with the Runners refusing to fight me at full strength lasted four days.

The final straw was when Saska and Emil had been drawn for their second Hunt. The lovers managed to return alive the next night, but Emil's leg had been sliced up by a Hunter's blade so badly that he had to spend two days in *MedCom* as Sal slowly mended the muscles.

I'd finally cornered Jordry, the tall curly-haired brunette that smelled like a coin purse, in *The Gardens* in front of the golden statue one night after dinner. He'd been put in charge in Rhydian's absence and was the most likely person to be honest with me. So I asked him. Why were the Runners refusing to fight me like an

equal? Not the question I had originally intended to ask, but the one that simply escaped me.

"Because you're the boss's wife."

I'd paced the space before the bench when he sat beside the golden woman, contemplating how to respond to that ridiculous excuse and found myself asking what exactly Rhydian's orders were, and not to lie because I would know.

"Help you with anything you need," he'd said. "But to not talk about Runner business."

"Then help me train. How am I supposed to stay alive out there, and protect my friends if I can't fight other Brutes, other Blessed at full strength? I can't believe Rhydian wouldn't want that?" That last statement was my desperate attempt to use the lie. To appeal to Jordry's years of friendship with Rhydian. It had worked.

The following day the Runners threw everything at me. I went to bed that night bruised but vindicated.

The morning Rhydian returned from his third trip off the train, I was in the middle of a sparring session with the person I hated nearly as much as him. Wade—regardless of my reasons for detesting him—was a good teacher.

He never threw a punch he did not intend to make connect. He always noticed why a move I pulled failed, correcting me if he knew how, and when something I did in the ring was unfamiliar to the other passengers, he would have me demonstrate it to them. My animosity towards him was evident to everyone, but neither of us let it get in the way of the task at hand.

My discovery of his relationship with Sal wasn't as groundbreaking as I'd initially thought it to be. All my bunkmates had figured that part out before I had. I'd been so self-involved in my thoughts during those first days onboard, never leaving the sleeper carriage, that they had gathered what I hadn't. But the other piece of information I'd garnered, that Bennic may have been a Charmer, that was not something any of them were aware of.

Regardless of my own experiences, Charmers were usually known to have quite positive influences on the communities they lived in. Tomas was a Charmer, and I had not experienced one negative

emotion directed at the Train Justice. It made me wonder how those first days might have been different had Bennic lived.

Jordry grunted from his side of the mat. Saska stared down at his hunched frame with a smirk, shrugging his shoulder as if to say "What?" when I looked over at him.

My instincts had me dodging Wade's fist. He had used the distraction to try to get in a hit. I'd gotten better in the last few days. Even without the use of his blessing, his punches hurt like a bitch. The first strike he'd ever connected with my face knocked me clean out for several minutes. Today he finally missed.

We circled one another. He was more than twice my size, and a good foot taller than Rhydan. And his shoulders were wrought in thick solid muscle, likely a trait inherited from his Bear-Blessed father. At least according to what I'd heard.

He used his physicality well. I attempted to attack him but ended up being lifted and thrown against the nearby pillar, only just avoiding S'vara and Lex.

It would no doubt leave a bruise. I moaned at the discomfort I felt. It had the desired effect on the man.

Feeling sympathetic, Wade crossed the short distance to reach me, offering me his hand to rise. I grasped it, then used the momentum of his pull to spring onto his back. Wrapping myself around him, I pinned an arm between my legs and secured his head in a headlock, then I swung back with all my weight, forcing us to the ground. It was the only way I knew I could contain him. Low to the ground.

Wade was strong, but I knew some of my skills surpassed his. This was one of them.

I locked him into place and finally asked the question. "Why did you kill Bennic?"

The redhead paused in his struggle, as though caught off guard. Had he thought I'd just forgotten about it? Had he expected I'd just let the death of an innocent go?

"Who?" His hand attempted to pry my arm from around his neck, his thick fingers no doubt leaving bruises where they pressed into my skin. I tightened my grip. "Bennic. The man you killed the day I arrived. You used your blessing to crush his chest. Why?"

Wade didn't answer. Instead, he used what little manoeuvrability he could to twist on the floor. It didn't help him. I squeezed my legs tighter ensuring his arm was completely immobile. He began to struggle, the tinge of his already ruddy complexion turning purple.

"Why?" I growled out, shaking his oversized body to demand a response. The other pairs had started to cease their sparring, their fear at my behaviour buzzing in the air like flies on a hot day. I saw Lex beside S'vara in my periphery take a step forward only for her to hold him back. The words "It's between them" reached my ears in her blunt tone. The Runners looked ready to intervene, but it didn't matter. I could smell it on him. Wade had no intention of telling me anything. I'd gathered enough information in the last few weeks about Runners to know that they never took collars unless they were from the dead in the Hunts. And the council had already dealt him their punishment.

Wade had broken the "Non-Combatant Covenant," the oath the collarless swear to if they choose to become Runners.

*A Runner shall take no life unless in the protection of another.*

*A Runner shall claim no collar unless to retrieve one from the dead.*

The council had sentenced him to one month off the train. With any luck, he would not be back.

When I felt his heartbeat slow enough, I released him. He fell unconscious onto my lap. I wriggled out from under him as his friends moved towards us, hesitating when I stood. "Don't worry. I didn't kill him."

Malden, the Bear-Blessed Runner from among Rhydian's circle, and the one who often ran the training sessions shouted at me as I adjusted my gloves and turned to leave the mat. "Training isn't over for today!"

"It is for me." Unfortunately, my rather dramatic exit was commandeered by the other man who held that burning pit in my chest. Rhydian, beard longer than when I'd last seen him, lounged against the frame of the carriage door, that ridiculously chiselled face amused at my expense as I stumbled in surprise. I tried to bush it

off. "What, never seen a woman take down a man twice her size before?"

I brushed past him, taking note of the pack on his back. He'd only just returned? I hadn't even noticed the train slow down.

"I have." He meandered up beside me as we crossed through the passage into *The Cantina*. "Just never one who did it with such flare."

As we entered the passageway to *The Gardens*, Rhydian said, "Still trying to figure out why he killed your bunkmate?" I shifted to let a group of passengers pass by and found him staring at me. "No. Not at all." I didn't even attempt to hide the lie.

He kept pace with me through the carriage until a large crowd of passengers coming from the seventh-hour meal pushed through the passageway forcing us both against the wall. My body was pressed into his, the metal of his belt buckle cold against the bare skin of my stomach, forcing me to stifle a small gasp at the sudden sensation. With my arms braced against his chest, having nowhere else to move, I could feel his heart beating against the palms of my hands. It was oddly welcoming.

Sometimes at night, the ones where I did not dream, I'd find myself waking up with my head against his chest, the sound comforting. It had startled me at first, that I could find comfort in the man I'd vowed to destroy. But it had forced me to acknowledge something.

The nights he was in my bed, I didn't dream. I slept. And the nights he was gone, I didn't sleep. Because I didn't want to dream. So when we did share a bed, I'd leave my head there against his chest, absorbing his scent, listening to his heartbeat, and I would forgive myself that one thing. I would tell myself that it was good if he found me asleep against him in such a way. Proximity spawned intimacy.

I slid my hand up his chest and began touching the unkempt curls of his beard.

He surveyed my figure, his eyes trailing the toned muscles of my arms, the spot where his thumb was softly pressing into my forearm felt raw under his touch. **"You look good,"** his inner voice declared.

Whether he knew I had heard him or not, I could not tell. He hadn't been gone so long that he could have forgotten how my blessing worked.

I pushed off him when the passage cleared and headed through the next series of carriages until we reached the council Chambers, the usual influx of passengers milling about in the foyer waiting for the class to start. "Have you ever thought that the reason he insists on keeping it a secret is because it isn't his secret to tell?"

The voice in my head that found sense in his words was quickly suppressed as we headed up the stairwell to the second-floor viewing alcoves. I was not at all ashamed to use him to secure myself a prime spot. He let me lead him by the hand right up the stairs and over to the balcony where the passengers made space just for us to see the class taking place in the chambers below.

Hentirion had been a constant presence during classes for the littles. Due to his vocation as a scholar, he was encouraged by the other passengers to educate the children about the world beyond the train. In particular the history of the world.

I leaned on the rail, watching him conduct his class from the same spot I'd witnessed the council announce Wade's punishment. Today was his second official class since he'd spent the last two weeks sitting in on the other classes. He'd used that time to memorise the children's names and had traded some of his supplies to get paper to create what he called Lesson Plans.

Yesterday he'd taught the children about The God Fall. But soon realised that the passengers, let alone the children knew very little as to the origin of themselves.

Rhydian leaned on the rail beside me. "What is he teaching them?"

I'd seen the notes on the scholar's bunk. "The Origin of Taints." Rhydian's attention appeared peaked.

Hentirion's low voice carried right to us on the third landing where dozens of passengers had heard about his classes and had come purposefully to watch. I spied S'vara and Saska on the second-floor landing opposite, and Emil on the ground floor, sitting on the hardwood by a pillar, his blessing causing the pieces of copper wiring to twist in his hands without him even looking.



Rhydian's grandfather Kosha, someone I have barely interacted with, intentionally on my part for the last three weeks, was sitting down there as well. He'd positioned himself on a chair at the back of the class with a clear line of sight of Hentirion. He caught my eye and nodded to me when he saw who I was with.

Hentirion stood at the front of the Council Chambers on the ground level. Situated before him, seated at the large horseshoe table where the council normally held their meetings, were at least fifty children, the youngest probably no older than eight. After addressing the carriage, he stepped forward and touched the tech board at the front of the class causing a large hand-drawn image to appear.

An oval divided horizontally into three.

I knew that image. There wasn't a great house in Deos that didn't have it weaved into a tapestry in their halls.

"Does anyone know what this image depicts?" Hentirion looked around at the group of children, his tone softer around them than our group.

"An egg!" a little boy with fox ears shouted.

"It's not an egg silly. That's the world," little Ghena spoke up, her eyes narrowing at the little boy as though she found his comment the stupidest thing in the world. She then smiled up at Hentirion. "Right Teacher?" They'd begun using that title as a sign of respect for him.

"That is correct" He leaned forward slightly, a small smile on his face as he looked at the little boy. "I think it looks like an egg too."

As the little boy giggled at the comment, Hentirion straightened and walked back over to the tech board.

"This, according to centuries of academic study, depicts the world as the gods built it." He indicated to each section of the diagram. "The upper region is the God Sphere. Some call it the Heavens. The centre is Terra where our continent of Idica resides, and the lower region is the Dark Sphere."

A shiver ran through the carriage at his last words. The image depicted the lower half of the world, the one that existed beneath ours was a series of tunnels and channels all leading to Veliah's

Necropolis. A cavernous city made of black stone, with no light but that which the souls in service to her collected in pails from the river of The Deep Waters.

A little girl shakily raised her hand, one of the long rabbit ears atop her head drooping at her hesitance. "Yes, Nella?" Hentirion said.

"How did the gods make the world?"

Hentirion scanned the chamber, looking at the children. "Does anyone want to answer that?" When none of the children did, he offered it up to the passengers. A man on the second landing, who sounded an awful lot like Farox shouted out, "Why don't you tell us the story?"

"Very well." Hentirion tried to hide the smile on his face.

I realised then that it had been intentional. He'd wanted to make a show out of the lesson. To spark interest in the topic. He began to pace the chamber, every eye fixated on him. He suddenly paused and tapped the tech board.

I shouldn't have been surprised that Hentirion knew exactly how the Prean piece of technology worked. Haltians were Preans after all.

The drawing which had been on the glass a moment ago suddenly moved into the middle of the chambers, as though an illusion of light. It floated in the air above the children, drawing cries of awe from their little voices. As Hentirion continued, the image morphed into the very things he spoke of.

I knew the story all too well. The scriptures within Celestisum, as dictated and created by the Servitors who were the priests of the religion of Deos made sure every child in the country had the tale memorised by the age of nine.

How the gods birthed themselves from the Elemental Waters and how they built the God Sphere for themselves. They created humanity and gifted us Terra, and how one of the gods, Veliah, caused the Great Division. Seeing fault in humanity she cursed them. Gave them fear and anger, greed and violence, and pride corrupting the world. The gods' only recourse was to create a prison to contain her.

They split the world in half and sealed her in the below. The Dark Sphere. Unable to undo what Veliah had wrought upon the world,

the gods sought a way to curb her influence and so they chose certain humans to bestow gifts upon which could be used for great deeds.

In Deos, the descendants of those humans were known as The Blessed. But over time, the gods disputed how best to use The Blessed and they fragmented, creating the various Pantheons of Idica. The Celestials in Deos, The Core in Kensilla, The Nine over Prea, The Primes of Pazgar and Oltise, before they granted themselves absolute power and renamed the nation The Gods Hold, were The Cardinals. And then after millennia under their guidance, The God Fall occurred. Each nation had a different story of why the gods chose to rule over us instead of abandoning us.

I was taught that The Blessed of the past were seen worthy of the gifts the Celestials bestowed upon them, but we as their descendants had to prove ourselves worthy of the Celestial's favour. Those who succeeded were granted a place alongside their ancestors in the God Sphere, where their spirits lit up the night sky. Those of us who failed, who allowed Veliah's curse to rule us, would serve her in death in her kingdom in the Dark Sphere. Whilst this was the belief of many in Idica, there were some who refused to let the gods dictate their lives.

Hentirion had just explained that last part when he asked if anyone knew which nation.

S'vara spoke up. "The Prean Union. We accept that Veliah will claim us upon our deaths but whilst we live, our lives are our own. The gods cannot dictate how we live them."

The same little girl with the long ears, Nella, looked over to S'vara. "But aren't you afraid you'll meet one and anger them? The gods walk the earth because of The God Fall."

Tira chose this moment to speak up. "All peoples of the Prean Union believe the gods only hold power if you grant it to them."

A sentiment I wished I believed.

She had sat in the back of the class as she had done for the last week. We'd learned soon after our arrival that she was illiterate like most Terrestrials of the communes on the Enibon islands. Their educations were more practical than intellectual. Hentirion had been

teaching her to read from whatever material we could find on the train. Her attendance in this class had less to do with reading and more to do with information gathering.

"Can anyone tell me what they know about the gods?" Hentirion tapped on the techboard once again causing it to display an image I had seen in a k long ago. It was a tapestry of a god. Physically no different to us except for one thing—their gold eyes. My body gave an involuntary shiver that had Rhydian glancing over to me. I ordered my body to still as the children started to chime in. "They can read your mind!"

"They have golden skin like a snake."

"They cannot be killed!"

I caught Rhydian smiling down at the class in muted delight. I'd smiled in response and instantly wiped the expression from my face, angry my body had felt the need to betray me. More so that he found amusement in such a dangerous topic.

I tried counting the children to refocus and noticed that at least two hadn't shown up today.

"They can curse you into a slug!"

Laughter filled the chamber, but it wasn't entirely free of restraint. Several faces seemed to blanch at the little boy's words. I knew what they feared.

But the gods couldn't know everything, they couldn't hear everything. I had to believe that or I wouldn't still be alive.

Hentirion smiled brightly. His fatherly demeanour was so warm, it was hard to believe he was the same man who could ignite this entire room and leave nothing but cinders should he wish.

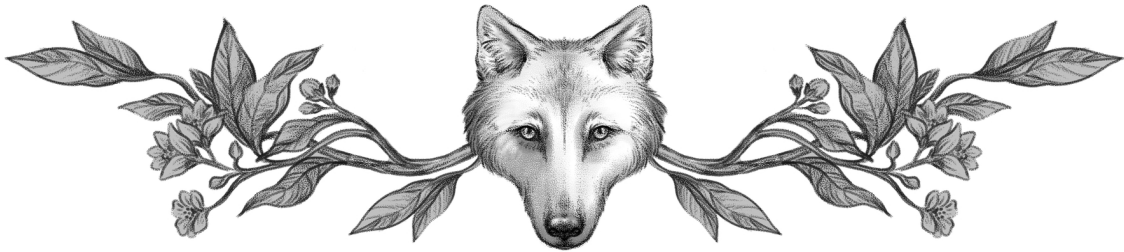
"Has anyone heard of the saying 'Always look a god in the eye'?" There were nods and voiced affirmations from around the chamber. "Can anyone tell me where they think that saying comes from?"

Kosha spoke up for the first time in at least half a dozen lessons I'd seen him sit in on. His voice was gravely, and slow, sounding more like one of my father's superiors every time we met. "The gods take it as an insult and will likely curse you than forgive you for the slight for not making eye contact with them."

Hentirion remained impressed, nodding in approval to the councillor before redirecting the class to the board where he had a map of Idica appear. I wanted to correct the old men, but it would just draw questions I could never answer.

"Rhydian, we're ready." I spun around at the sound of Eleen's voice. She was dressed in her fight gear, but I had not seen her at training, so the sight was odd, especially since she should be on her way to her shift in *The Bathhouse* right about now.

**"Follow me,"** his inner voice said. When he realised I hadn't moved, confused by his invitation he spoke again, the tone to his thoughts serious. **"You're getting what you want. You're coming on a supply run."**



## RIEKA

"You have forty-eight hours," Rhydian said as he snapped a small magnetic disk onto the inside of my collar.

We stood by the roller doors in *The Caboose* of the train. *The Abattoir* was the carriage where any animal that the Runners hunted, any animal that the Kensillan supply had delivered were taken to be slaughtered. I'd avoided it on account of the smell. The Brute part of me wanted to roll in it whilst the human part of me, the sane part of me was revolted by it. Those doors stood open to the world beyond, the train slowing just enough that we could feasibly jump from the train.

The device made a small mechanical chirp before going silent. Rhydian then proceeded to pull up the collar of my coat. The display of affection caused a fluttering in my chest I quickly cut myself off from, instead choosing to focus on the world outside the train, only to regret that decision too. The last time I'd left the train I'd been shot by an arrow and had to run for my life.

*This is what you wanted Rieka. Attachment cannot form if he does not trust you. You cannot escape this place without that trust.*

I took a deep breath to steady my nerves and found Rhydian's scent. It instantly calmed me. Which only made me more nervous.

My hatred towards my "husband" was now being fuelled by the fact I actually enjoyed his presence.

Rhydian urged me towards the gaping hole whilst every other passenger I knew to be a Runner waited behind me.

He said jump, so I did.

I expected to slam hard into the ground, but the impact felt rather like diving into the water of a creek. My momentum had been slowed somehow. When I stood, a woman with shoulder-length grey hair stood on the grass ahead of me, her hands outstretched before her.

With her, spread out at intervals along the tracks, waiting until the door passed before them, were others doing the same thing. They were all Pneumatics cushioning our falls by wielding the air. I watched as Rhydian jumped from the open doors, and then effortlessly float until his feet were firmly on the grass.

*He's done this before.*

We were a group of twenty Runners, not including the twelve who were already waiting for us, amongst them the collarless strangers I'd seen frequent the train in the last few weeks. Rhydian and the other Runners were familiar with them. The woman who'd cushioned my fall walked straight over to Jordry, embracing him in a hug before running her hands over his face and kissing his cheek. The air around them smelled familial. I suspected she might be his mother since she embraced Jordry's wife, Amida as well.

The woman then turned to Rhydian and much to my surprise, did the exact same thing to him. When they finally pulled out of the embrace, the woman sent a single glance my way before she spoke in Seja. Her gestures were directed at me.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked him.

I acted as though I didn't understand, not sure I was quite ready to let that little secret go. I had been lucky that I understood the other root languages that made up Seja. It had taken me six months to learn Prean, and another two to learn Athusian and Lycoan when I'd lived in the Celestial Offices. And that I had done in secret as well. Kensillan was an easier language to learn, and with all the translated signs on the train, I had learned the basics in a week, so I

could pick up conversational Kensillan. It also helped that I was inquisitive, the passengers seemed pleased to teach Seja to Rhydian's "wife." To show I wanted to learn their culture had gone a long way in endearing myself to them after my initial arrival.

It was the gestures that had taken most of the last three weeks to decipher. I was not fluent, but it was enough to work out the messages the Runners were passing between one another when they did not want me to hear them.

"We have to take the risk," Rhydian responded, the movement of his hands almost graceful.

He turned to me and introduced the woman as Filora, second in command of the Resistance and who was indeed Jordry's mother. He then indicated to the path ahead. "This way. We have a long walk."

For two hours through an empty valley, my senses told me Rhydian was leading us east. The dense woods would have been nearly impossible to navigate without prior knowledge. There were several wide paths hidden amongst the trees that we crossed, and we only stopped when we reached a large obscure object in a small clearing. It housed a pair of large steel doors and was wide enough that an Alatus could spread their wings to their full width with ease. It appeared to be made of stone, a protrusion of the earth.

Once everyone had gathered together, the grey-haired woman led us through the door, a few of her Runners and half of ours remaining behind.

I had not needed to let my eyes adjust to the darkness, one of the new Runners was a Bright. She channelled the luminous within her body down to her hands where they glowed an iridescent white and lit up the space. We were in a tunnel.

I estimated we had walked at least two miles in the dank and hollow space. An underground escape route perhaps. The Celestial archives said Kensilla had been full of them. It smelled old. Mixed in with the stale scent of oil and stone was blood. It tainted the air like powdered sugar, the residue of deaths long since passed filling me with an odd sense of relief.

Filora, who could not have been older than fifty, stopped by a door in the tunnel wall. "We'll see you here tomorrow," she said looking at



Rhydian, her tone sedate as she pulled a chain out from around her neck. A large white rectangle hung from it. She swiped the item across a techscreen by the frame and the door immediately made a metallic click and swung open.

I followed Rhydian and the other Runners up a stairway until we reached a heavy steel door, and behind it was another stairwell, which lead to another steel door, that only myself seemed surprised to encounter. A clear indication my companions had travelled this way before. Finally, after ascending through four more, we passed through the one door that was coated in paint—a chipped ruby red with gold flecks in the center as though something had once been there but had faded with time. We emerged on the other side in a room with wallpaper quite similar to those which covered the train's walls, though they were better kept here. As Rhydian led our group across the room, I threw a glance over my shoulder just in time to see Eleen closing what looked like a timber panel, entirely concealing our exit within the wall of a giant dining hall.

Tables and chairs were organised in circular rows, crystal glassware, fine porcelain crockery and silk table clothes adorning the surfaces. Bright-lights, their casings tinted yellow hung in stalactite formations from the ceiling, their glow refracting off the gold embroidery of the floor-to-ceiling twin tapestries that depicted the Kensillan Griffin as the symbol of The Core's power and might.

Rhydian set his ear against the large oak doors set between them. A minute later, indicating the coast was clear, he had the nine of us follow him out. The morning sun shone near white through the wall of glass to my right, the light forcing my eyes to hastily adjust from the dimness of the dining hall. The large timepiece against one of the walls indicated we were still only in the ninth hour of the day. Beside it was a large desk and behind it stood—

A man, dressed in a lilac suit with slicked back hair locked eyes with me and for the split second it took his gaze to travel over my face, I froze, my body preparing to attack should he move even an inch from his spot behind that desk. But he never called for help. The moment he found Rhydian, the tension in his features vanished. The man jerked his head to the right, and beside me, his body void

of anything smelling remotely fearful, Rhydian nodded, acknowledging the man. The exchange caused my curiosity to get the better of me and I slowed my pace.

I recognised this place, or at least something like it. We didn't have public accommodation in Deos. When one wanted to travel between provinces, papers were assigned. Households who could accommodate visitors would open their doors to anyone who required a roof over their head. Deogns believed it was against their civic duty to do otherwise.

I know I joked about it when Rhydian had called the death train The Lobby, but the truth was The Old Man's Hearth had been the closest I'd ever come to a hotel.

But that's what this place was. A hotel. The sign on the desk the man stood behind, written in Kensillan read "Reception."

A firm hand grasped mine and upon looking at the owner, Rhydian's ocean-blue eyes willed me forward. He pulled me across the entry room, and into an elevator which took us up to the top floor, the dial indicating level six. Upon exiting into a corridor, Eleen handed out four white rectangles similar to the one the woman used in the tunnel and we separated into groups. A dark-haired man took Jordry and the little blond Kindling Gala into one room. Eleen came with Rhydian and me, and Lera entered the third room with Mal and Wade, who'd recovered enough from his knockout to join us. Amida, Anika and Si'mon had all stayed behind at the tunnel.

The room we entered was not exactly beautiful. It was bright and finely dressed in fresh flowers and crystal vases with one wall entirely inlaid with mirrors. Rather, it was practical. It looked like my family's apartment in the Borough, but instead of being spread on three floors vertically, everything was laid out horizontally. I could see a bedroom to the left, a private dining room to the right off an equally large kitchen.

The soft rumble of water running through pipes in the walls to the left told me there was a working bathroom in this place. A sitting room with a sofa that could easily serve as another bed filled the central space where a wide window occupied the majority of the far

wall. I walked towards it to look out but halted when Eleen rushed over and closed the drapes.

With the door now shut, Rhydian finally saw fit to fill me in on what we were doing here, and where here even was.

As I processed his words, I had to pinch my legs several times to make sure I wasn't dreaming. Not that dreaming was even preferable given the circumstances.

We were still in Kensilla, but we were now in one of their rural towns about seven miles from the tracks of the rail. A place Rhydian called Old King's Town. My job was to go with Eleen into this town, and purchase supplies for a party that was being hosted in the room we arrived in.

The hotel was far enough from the centre of town that we would give off the impression to the locals that we wanted to maintain our privacy. This would allow us the secrecy to leave back through the tunnel with said supplies and be back on the train before the device on my neck died and told the Kensillan government I was no longer on the train, resulting in my immediate and electrifying death.

It was only possible for me to be here on account of the little magnetic device on my collar. And it had an expiration date.

I tried to memorise the rules as Eleen told them to me whilst she attempted to tame my hair into the fashion of the slave—the Thralls of Kensilla. A long ponytail tied at the base of my neck, her own rich brown already fastened in the same manner. And not a hair permitted to be out of place.

"Don't look anyone in the eye. They won't expect you to. If anyone with a gold pin speaks to you, keep your eyes on the ground. Those are the Naven. They are the highest-ranked members of Kensillan society and they will expect you as a Thrall to be obedient. If they ask something of you, do it. Unless they ask you to directly disobey your own Naven's commands. Then by law, you can reject their request. We'll only be making contact with the Nomen in the community. They wear the green pins."

I swallowed trying to process her words. "Can I look them in the eye?"

Eleen put my chin between her forefinger and her thumb, raising my head to look into her eyes. "Not unless they ask you to."

With her water satchel swinging where it was fastened on her hip, I watched as Eleen fetched the tan-coloured dress from the large four-poster bed. The one that was identical to the one she already wore. "If they do," she added, "they risk being charged with Contemplation of Theft. And most Nomen are too desperate to become Naven to risk that blemish on their records anyway."

Eleen pulled the bland outfit over my head, the straight rectangular dress covering the undergarments she'd already had me wear after showering. "Naven would never let an unclean Thrall go out in public. It would ruin their reputation," had been her reasoning.

She had me slide on a pair of tan shoes. Once I had, I walked over to the floor length mirror. I'd seen myself regularly in the mirrors in the communal sleeper washrooms, but it had been such a long time since I'd seen my entire reflection. I'd changed so much.

I knew I wasn't eating enough, though many passengers were not at present, so the thinning of my face I had expected. It was the toning of my body I had not. The way my muscles had started to show under the skin of my forearms and down my calves, like my body was becoming something that resembled the men my father trained. If it wasn't for my hair, I'd have said it was a different woman staring back at me through the mirror.

"Why are some Thralls bald?" I asked Eleen through the reflection as she scribbled on a piece of paper.

"Those Thralls are usually owned by charter companies. Thralls are really expensive," she noted almost apologetically. "A single one can raise a Nomen to Naven rank. Charter companies allow regular citizens like the Nomen to use Thralls at a tenth of the cost it is to purchase one."

I wasn't delighted by the fact that not only did these people purchase slaves like a new wardrobe, but they rented them out for cheap labour. I should just be grateful Eleen didn't ask how I knew about the bald trait. I wasn't particularly inclined to recount that piece of my recent past.

I turned in the reflection, noting just how long my hair had gotten in recent months, the white locks falling in one long wave to my lower back when movement in the mirror drew my eye.

A figure dressed in red stepped out of the bathroom behind me. Straight-leg trousers, a charcoal waistcoat with gold inlaid stitching around the waist to match the gold embellished tie. A scarlet evening jacket that hung to his thighs with dark crimson lapels, fastened across his chest by a gold chain. The blond hair that he usually tied back in a half bun, fastened by that silver hairpin was tussled back and hung loose about his shoulders, the thick locks combed back off his face which, much to my surprise, was clean-shaven.

He was beautiful. The kind of beautiful that the gods would have favoured if it weren't for that devious look in his eyes. More wolf than hunter if I dared to admit.

Somehow, having detected my attraction to his current state, the first words out of his cocky mouth were, "Forgot I was pretty didn't you."

"Can you two please save it for home?" Eleen commented from the back of the room. Sometimes it was easy to forget that that prison really was home to these people.

Removing the scowl from my face I returned to admiring his appearance. For mission-related purposes of course.

A golden griffin in flight, no longer than my thumb and no bigger than a coin was pinned over his right breast. Grasped in its claws was a large ring from which hung two smaller rings, each one a representation of how many Thralls one owned.

"My Naven I presume."

Rhydian gave me the smallest of nods before his own gaze surveyed my figure. He quickly closed the distance between us when he noticed something on my collar. A thread. He snapped it off with a quick yank, his fingers touching my neck for no more than a few seconds, but it was enough to make the skin on my arms tingle.

I snapped my eyes away, choosing to look at the Worship Marks on my wrists instead. Once I had found the sight welcoming, calling on the one it represented to give me strength in times of need. Even

now, so far from that place, the desire still lingered. Wearing gloves meant I did not have to see them, didn't have to inform to where I'd come from. Having them uncovered, for all the world to see, I felt more naked than when I'd undressed after the Hunt.

*Which reminds me.* I sent word to Rhydian silently. *"You still owe me a tub. Eight nights Rhydian."*

The dimple in his cheek finally made its long-awaited entrance. And it was not a disappointment. ***"I'm working on it."***

A knock on the door sent the room into startled silence. A triple knock followed. Rhydian approached, leaning close to the door. "If the gods knew?" he spoke in Seja.

From the other side of the door, I recognised Lera's voice. "We'd be dead."

Considering the relief that flooded his features, the response had been the desired one.

Rhydian opened the door; however, it was not Lera, with her perpetually bored expression who stood in the corridor. It was a young woman I'd never seen before, her dark hair in two singular waves that rested on her shoulders, her long limbs adorned in an emerald green dress, the material very similar to the one worn by Rhydian.

"Naven," he greeted her.

"Naven," she replied in Lera's nonchalant voice.

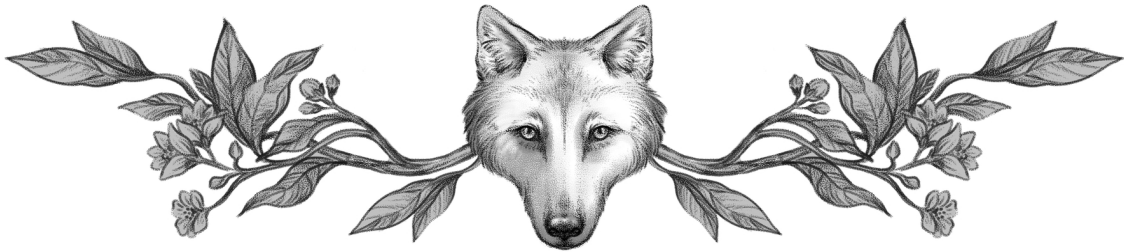
It took me a moment to realise what I was seeing. The woman with Lera's voice entered the room accompanied by two burly men in grey garments, as plain as the tan smock I wore. The one closest to me, with the ginger hair, spoke when we made eye contact.

"She looks like she's having a stroke, didn't anyone tell her?" He had Wade's voice.

Rhydian took a step forward, casually placing a hand in his coat pocket as he answered. "I was just getting to that."

But he needn't have bothered. I understood. Lera was the Skin Weaver Rhydian had spoken of. A Fabricant Spindle capable of reworking skin. That was how they had gotten away with this type of work for so long. That was why Kensilla had no idea the Runners were bringing supplies back onto the train.

They were changing their faces.



## RIEKA

The vehicle that picked us up from the hotel was split in two. Rhydian, Lera and the dark-haired man who had been introduced to me as Costin were seated in a private front compartment, whilst myself, Eleen and the rest of the Runners were required to sit in the back, in a sealed compartment half the size for twice the number.

The driver, a Nomen who I'd quickly come to realise was not associated with us as the Receptionist was, drove us from the hotel to the town centre. The town I saw through the narrow windows of the car was vastly different to anything I'd seen before. Two-story brick buildings in single rows on either side of a wide road, glass-fronted buildings with trade items on display in the windows. Tan and grey attired individuals walked in small lines behind lavishly dressed shoppers, pulled along as though by some invisible leash. Each one, a collar around their neck.

I'd questioned that fact when I'd seen the one around Wade's own neck, silently curious if he'd decided to bear the burden of the one he'd claimed from Bennic. He hadn't. He would be remaining behind with Filora's people after the supply run.

As it turned out, mine and Eleen's were the only live collars. Until this morning, every Runner except Eleen was collarless. Now four of them wore collars. But due to my inability to leave things alone, I



soon had Eleen divulging to me that those collars were inert. Whilst most collars could only be removed from the bodies of the deceased and then made inert, the item becoming nothing more than a necklace, it was impossible to remove the collars from a living person. Without a code. The issue then came from the fact there was not one single code to release all the collars. So it was very likely that the train's collars also had a code. And no one had obtained it in centuries, or why else would the rail still exist?

As I ran my finger between my collar and my skin to allow some relief from the metal that had begun its task of branding me, I let the outside view distract me. Or at least I tried to let it.

Gala, one of the Kindling Runners, was the only person in the vehicle who seemed even remotely as interested in the world outside as I was. Her face was so close to the glass I could see her breath against it.

I was conflicted though. On the one hand, this new place had me curious. I'd only ever seen Deos and The Hetra and had always craved to see other parts of the world. On the other hand, I had to keep reminding myself that the strange woman in the window's reflection was me.

Lera had changed my face soon after she had arrived in the hotel room, after she had inquired if my ability to bespell would do the job instead. I'd had to emphasise several times that I'd chosen not to speak the spells, especially since the incident with the Hunter—though I kept that part to myself. After all that had happened that night, the danger I posed to anyone around me was too great a risk. My blessing was far too unpredictable to risk any spell. I'd vowed that no matter what, I wouldn't use Gods' Tongue again. It was the use of that word—vow—that had rendered them all silent on the matter.

***"Repeat to me the rules,"*** Rhydian's inner voice called out from the forward compartment, drawing my eyes from the street outside. I turned my attention to my hand as I responded, tracing over the skin where my worship marks should have been but were hidden beneath a layer of freshly woven skin.

**"Good,"** he said when he was satisfied with my response. I could almost hear the self-assured nod that accompanied it. ***"I will be in the teahouse at the end of the street with Lera and Costin if you need me. Nomen never do their own shopping, so you just stick with Eelen. Do everything she says and maybe we'll get through this."***

*"You say that like you haven't done this before."* I stared into the black leather of the interior, imagining I could see through it into his compartment and gaze at the back of his head, willing an answer out of him. But Rhydian didn't answer.

*"You have done this before, right?"*

I'd have sworn I could hear him swallow a lump in his throat.

***"Not on this scale."***

Was this why he had been gone so long? Had he been out here planning this mission?

*"You'll use me to save the lives of your passengers even if it could cost me my own, but you won't let me know to whom it is you give it up to. Such a warped moral code you have, husband."*

He chuckled. ***"You're the one who wanted to be broken in."***

*"You say that like I'm some kind of wild animal."*

I imagined him, leaning in, as though to whisper it in my ear. His next words rolled effortlessly from his thoughts, the tone as breathless as if he'd just spent the last minute with his lips locked upon mine. ***"I doubt very much you can be tamed, wife."***

Eelen nudged my shoulder pulling my thoughts from Rhydian just as the vehicle came to a stop. She passed out the handwritten supply lists, each one different enough from the others that the supplies wouldn't draw attention when they were presented to the store clerks. "Everyone knows what to do?" Even after the nods Eelen turned to Gala to get reassurance.

"Yes," the young blonde Kindling replied. "Order the supplies and have them delivered to the hotel within the next three hours where the hotel will then take charge of them for the *party*. I've got it."

Wade smiled at her. Whilst I'd never admit it aloud, the Pneumatic was a rather handsome man. Yet somehow, because Skin Weavers could only alter the surface and not the face shape, Lera had made

Wade look quite unremarkable. His usually vibrant red hair was lifeless with this new face. Just as lifeless as that of his younger sister. A fact I'd learned not an hour ago when Lera was changing my own face, though it had done little to improve my opinion of Wade. Having a sweet sister like Gala didn't change the fact he was still a murderer.

The doors to the compartment opened and the Runners filed out one by one. I waited until Eelen reached the door to take one final breath, searching for even the slightest trace of the calming scent leaking from Rhydian's compartment. I inhaled and stepped out.

The sights and sounds were distracting. The sound of vehicle motors, mixed in with the voices of Kensillans who moved about the town, the smell of freshly baked pastries, the scent of perfume—They were so familiar, and maybe a little too similar to the days I'd promenade with my parents. I had to refocus, to keep my head down, to not be noticed. My bunkmates' lives depended on the success of this mission, and considering Rhydian's statement in the vehicle, we were in desperate need of these supplies.

Eelen's scent had to be my focus, even if it did make me a little nauseous. I kept her to my right following just a few paces behind as I'd been instructed. Even amongst Thralls, seniority mattered, and today, Eelen's Thrall identity had been collared longer than mine.

I should have felt excitement seeing a new place, but all I felt was disdain. Eelen had warned me that I should try to suppress my emotions because any Brute we encountered would detect it. Especially since it wasn't an emotion Thralls regularly displayed.

But it was difficult. The longer we walked down the street the more I was conflicted over what I saw.

The citizens wore the most beautiful clothes and had the most dazzling jewellery and elegant hairstyles. Their vehicles were sleek, long and well-maintained. I saw couples sitting outside teahouses, women laughing as they strolled down the sidewalk and men playing some type of ball game in a park we passed by.

And I saw the Thralls. Simply existing. Never acknowledged unless required to hold a bag or open a door. Each one with that damn

collar around their necks.

Eleen halted abruptly as a figure in grey was pushed out of a building doorway. My chest constricted at the sight of him. The young male Thrall who'd been thrown to the sidewalk—his hands and knees grazed on the coarse cement spicing the air with his blood—was a Talon. For a split second, before he looked up and I saw his face, I thought a God of Fate had led me to Taren. But he bore a stranger's face. And his wings were white.

Ranting off something about inappropriate behaviour, a Naven man dressed similarly to Rhydian stormed out of the doorway and glared down at the winged Thrall. His hatred was stomach-churning.

In a display akin to a child throwing a tantrum, he rushed to pull something out of his pocket and jabbed it in the direction of the injured Thrall. A small disk. As he was about to press it, Eleen instructed me to turn my back to the scene.

I did as she said just a moment before I heard the unmistakable sound of the collar shocking the Thrall. I expected to smell cooked meat and find a burnt corpse on the sidewalk when I turned back around but when the Naven ordered the Thrall to get up, I realised the device he'd used was merely a way to inflict pain on his slave. Not to kill them.

Only when the pair had walked past us, the Thrall whimpering in pain that scented the air, did Eleen turn back around and proceed forward.

I narrowly avoided the vomit that Thrall had painted the pavement with.

As we passed the door, I slowed my pace just enough that I could see inside the building. It was a drinking establishment. Alcohol, pipeweed, and perfume.

Over the bar counter was a techboard and what it displayed made bile rise to my throat.

Lily had explained it to me once during kitchen duty when I asked if she knew anything about Kensilla making Thralls watch the Hunts.

Kensilla had technology that recorded in photographs like audibles did sound. Only these photographs were like watching a live play.

Kensilla did the same for the Hunts, broadcasting them live across the entire Republic.

On the tech board, a figure in black drew back on a bow string and let loose an arrow.

The crowd of men inside jumped from their bar stools and tables and cheered as the arrow embedded itself into the neck of—

Eleen grabbed my hands and dragged me from the door's threshold, her eyes wide.

***"Are you trying to get us hung?"***

Suddenly the memory of the rope around my neck rushed back and all curiosity vanished. I moved back into place behind her and waited for her to take the lead once again.

Eleen took a very slow gulp, her hands clasping the water satchel on her waist tight enough her knuckles were turning white. She took a deep breath and turned back around to continue our passage to the store.

*"They do watch us die, don't they,"* I finally managed to say when the scent of the bar had thinned.

***"We're the number one traded item in their economy,"*** Eleen's inner voice said, her tone one of derision. ***"Doesn't matter if we live or die. They make money off us either way."***

*"I understand why they broadcast the Hunt. Keeping the Thralls in check whilst entertaining the citizens with a show of their power. A triumphant demonstration of what happens to their enemies. But why the separation? Why send me to the train and make others Thralls? How do they determine who they choose?"*

***"It's a punishment."***

*"Which one?"*

We stepped out of the path of an incoming Naven and her four Thralls, only continuing to speak when we were walking again.

***"The train. It's not a prison for us just because we're tainted. It's a place they can send any Devo or human their Republic deems problematic. If they executed everyone who pissed them off, they'd be hanging people every day. Instead, they send them to the Lobby to be executed. Those that survive, live on the train and die eventually anyway."***

*"That's quite fatalistic."*

***"I find it something to be grateful for. Being born on the train and not on a farm gives one hope, and family. Love. As a Thrall, all that is beaten from you. And you become the worst version of yourself. Don't mistake their meekness for compliance. Thralls are adaptable, manipulative and if nothing else, survivors. They'd betray their own brother if it meant another day in the grace of their God Kings."***

I wanted to ask what she meant by a farm, and why the train was the better option when Eleen finally halted. We stood outside a store that had the lingering scent of a fresh food market. It was rare to find such an airtight room that didn't leak the scents within.

Eleen pulled open the door, a bell overhead indicating our entry. Keeping my head lowered, my eyes on the ground I followed her inside.

My senses told me there were four in the store beside us. A Nomen behind the register. He was the clerk. Another male at the back of the store, and standing beneath the tech board, beside the sacks of grain were two female Thralls in tan smocks staring at the floor.

Eleen, as though she'd done it hundreds of times, which she very well might have, walked right up to the counter and placed the supply list on the surface. I could feel the eyes of the clerk as he sized us up. From his reflection in the glass countertop, I saw him pick up the note and examine it. After a contemplative grunt, the Nomen adjusted the green griffin pin on his shirt and excused himself to see if he had everything we needed in stock. Eleen simply bowed her head lower, remaining silent as she stepped aside to keep the counter area clear.

Curiosity snuck its way through the store—from the Thralls in the corner. And underneath it, spicing the air was a hint of something akin to eagerness. I tried to ignore them, hoping it was nothing more than being the fresh faces in town that had altered their scents. After a few minutes, when the clerk had returned, the browsing Nomen approached the counter.

"Nomen Orivas," the clerk addressed him.

"Nomen Sala," the other replied. "Large order this morning?"

The clerk murmured in agreement, adding, "Naven staying at the hotel decided to throw themselves a little soiree big enough to clear my stock. The Core's blessings you came in early."

I felt the eyes of Nomen Orivas on me then. Even in my effort to focus on Eleen, it was hard to ignore him. He left a nasty sour taste on my tongue. I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze.

The two female Thralls at the back of the store turned out to be with him, neither head shaved, but both wearing smocks that bore what looked like a brand on the material's right breast. They gathered the items he had purchased and waited behind him like small children terrified of being scolded by their father. He paused when he reached me, the heart rates of the two Thralls accompanying him spiking as the heat of his gaze slithered over me. I swallowed the bile that rose to my throat with his closeness. A moment later he departed the store, his Thralls trailing behind.

Eleen who had been holding her breath the entire time finally released it in a slow gust. ***"I knew I should have made Lera make you ugly,"*** she said, her thoughts betraying her. Lera had indeed made me pretty. She had thought that making me look more like a Kanahari would alleviate the nosiest of people since it wasn't uncommon to find Kanahari Thralls.

A fact that instantly made me think of Taren and where he could be.

Altering my face into that of a white-haired Northern Brute seemed like an achievable goal, even going to far as to temporarily erase my Worship Marks.

That Nomen's attention made me think otherwise.

"When does your Naven need it by?" Nomen Sala, the clerk asked Eleen. She raised three fingers and held them horizontally across her chest.

"In three hours?" He gave a heavy sigh. "Fine. You have the money?"

Eleen responded by pulling a purse from a pocket in her smock and placing it on the counter. The man's scent instantly changed.

Rust and pepper, the scent of greed never seemed to change. He took the purse. "It will be done."

With a bow of her head, a movement which I mimicked, Eleen turned and exited the store.

I spied our vehicle a few hundred meters down the street eager to return to those leather seats, but Eleen insisted on a slower pace. *Thralls don't run*. So I was forced to remain one step behind her.

We'd walked maybe half the distance when I picked up that sour scent again. Eleen came to a stop with a slight gasp as the customer from the store, Nomen Orivas stepped out in front of us and blocked our path forward.

I could feel his predatory gaze on me. "I've never seen one of your kind this far south," he said in Kensillan. I kept my eyes on his shoes as he took another step towards me. The man liked to give off the appearance of sophistication without the product to back it up. Beneath the black polish of his shoes, the leather was badly scuffed.

"Come with me, I need help getting my shopping in the vehicle," he ordered me, even though I could smell his two Thralls a few meters off to my right. The area around him flared in anger when I refused to respond.

Eleen's voice came out in a slight rush. "Forgive her, Nomen. She does not speak Kensillan." She had lied, because what else could she do when I'd disobeyed a direct order from a master.

The Nomen turned to Eleen. "Then you tell her."

I could smell her fear. It came off in waves, a tide crashing against the shore. She'd had no recourse. The man hadn't asked for anything against the rules. He hadn't asked to purchase us, he'd simply asked for aid, and by the law of this place we were required to give it.

I knew I did not have a choice in that moment. If I did not obey this man I could very find a noose once again around my neck.

My inner voice called out her name, causing her to snap to attention. "*Repeat to me what he said in Preat then go get Rhydian.*"

Her thoughts began to spiral until I shouted for her to be quiet and just do it. Her voice shook slightly as she translated, bowing to



the Nomen before he indicated for me to follow him. I could hear her heartbeat behind me as I followed him, passing the cowering figures of his two rented Thralls and into an alley between two of the buildings. I could only hope the fact her heartbeat was growing distant was because she was making her way down the street to the teahouse where Rhydian was.

If she ran, which she shouldn't do, he would be here within a minute. If she walked, which was the most likely scenario it would be three to five minutes. I could stall this piece of crap for that long.

I knew when we turned the corner there wouldn't be any vehicle waiting for us. I'd learned to pick up this type of scent quickly after leaving Aronbok. As much as they tried, predators of his sort could never hide their scents from my kind for very long.

The Nomen had taken me to a dead-end alley. Old brick walls, a cracked gutter overhead that had dripped water down the wall long enough that a mildew stain had formed on one side. With that predatory glint in his eye, the kind I'd expect in a cat about to play with their food, he approached me. And continued to do so until my back was flush against the wall.

Bracing both hands against the brick, boxing me in, he leaned forward and like one would delight in the scent of freshly brewed kharee, he sniffed my hair.

Upon the exhale, and entirely enthralled by the sound of his own voice he said, "I've had one of your kind before. Tasted like honey and dew drops." His words made the Thralls cowering against the wall flood the alley with fear. "I hope you're as feisty as she was."

He slid a rough hand down my thigh as he buried his head further into my neck. I bit the inside of my cheek at the sensation. He hooked his other hand around the back of my neck, gripping my collar. I waited for the collar to react, but it never did, which only meant one thing.

He had done this before.

The ferocity with which he pulled pressed down heavily on my throat causing my eyes to water. His hand slid down further, gathering up my smock to put his hand between my thighs. Stars danced across my vision. Tears fell to my cheeks as the edge of the

world began to blacken. Another thirty seconds of this, and I would lose consciousness. I couldn't decide if that was better. That I would be unconscious when he did what he wanted to with me. The wetness of his tongue as he dragged it up my cheek knocked the thought right out of my head and I made my choice.

I forced myself inside his head, my voice echoing off the walls of his mind, my thoughts an avalanche he couldn't outrun. And I prayed to the Eldertides that there was a female amongst the God-Kings of The Core.

**"ORIVAS!"**

The Nomen startled violently, pushing off me so fast my head hit the brick. I sputtered out a cough, catching my breath as he stepped away, eyes wide as he looked around the alley for the voice and finding no one.

He took one tentative step back towards me.

**"ORIVAS,"** I repeated whilst maintaining the appearance of the meek Thrall.

**"YOU DARE DEFILE YOURSELF WITH ONE OF THE QUARRY."** I made sure to use the Kensillan term for the Blessed.

The Nomen rushed for the opposite wall, his eyes on me shadowed in fear, his Thralls expressions confused.

**"HEAR ME. I SEE YOU. I KNOW WHAT IT IS YOU DREAM AT NIGHT, AND WHAT IT IS THAT DWELLS IN YOUR DARKEST OF HEARTS. NEVER AGAIN SHALL YOU TOUCH ANOTHER AS YOU HAVE TOUCHED THAT GIRL. KNOW THAT IF YOU SO MUCH AS LOOK AT ONE OF THE QUARRY AS YOU HAVE TODAY, I SHALL ENSURE THAT EVERY VILE THING YOU'VE DREAMED OF DOING BE LAID UPON YOU A THOUSANDFOLD. AND THAT YOU WILL WISH FOR A DEATH THAT NEVER COMES. NOW LEAVE HER."**

The Nomen bolted for the end of the alley, tripping over his own feet as he did and running right into the scarlet chest of my Naven.

Nomen Orivas bowed apologetically before he circled Rhydian and exited the alleyway.

I caught sight of the way Rhydian's fist closed at his side when he saw me hunched over, the way his jaw tightened as if he was about to say something. Then in an instant, the righteousness that I'd seen

on so many Naven in the street took hold of him, turning his features callous.

He turned to the two Thralls still standing in the alley, their gazes downcast.

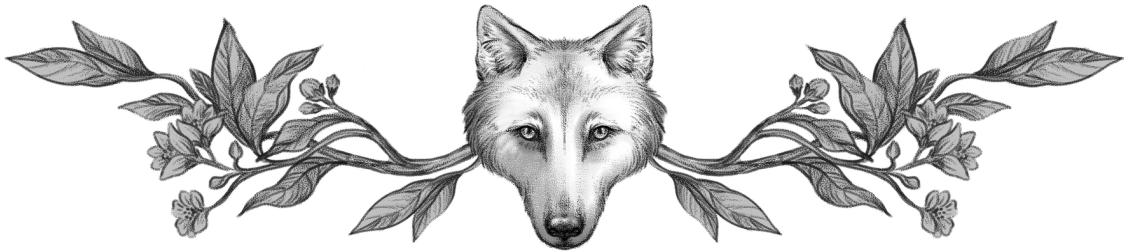
"Return to your Charter and report your abandonment. Now." They left immediately, passing Eelen and the rest of our party as they exited the alley.

Rhydian casually strode into the dead end with the look of a man who couldn't care less about my well-being and stopped right in front of me. Over his shoulder, I saw Eelen staring at me, her expression one of guilt. Rhydian took one step to the left and blocked her from my view.

**"Are you ok?"** his inner voice asked in a tone I'd never heard from him before. It was almost sweet.

I wanted to say yes. To tell him that I took care of it. To say that I was fine. That that man wasn't likely to sleep for the next thirty years. But instead, I straightened my spine, adjusted my smock and said, *"I will be."*

Because I had to be.



## RIEKA

The door to the apartment closed in awkward silence, as though it too could feel the tension enter with the three of us. The view from the window looked less appealing now that I was back inside.

Eleen cleared her throat as she crossed around behind me, heading into the fully stocked kitchen whilst yanking at the tie that fastened her hair.

Rhydian had chosen to recline in the sitting room, throwing his coat off, the scarlet material like spilled blood over the white leather of the sofa. He lounged an arm over his eyes to shield it from the sliver of bright gold that cracked through the break in the drapes.

Not wanting to let the scent of recent events soak any further into my skin I headed for the bedroom and the bathroom contained within. No one said anything as I left the room.

The shower was a tall rectangle built into the corner of the room, the basin nothing but a stale white platform bolted to the wall beside it where a large round mirror reflected a version of me I didn't recognise.

The moment I opened the shower faucet, whatever automatic lighting the room had set up switched on. The warm yellow that had been illuminating the room a moment ago disappeared in favour of the ring of blue light at the top and base of the shower stall. A

ghostly glow had enveloped the room that even my reflection looked like a wraith risen from the Dark Sphere.

I waited until the steam had fogged up the mirror before stripping off the Thrall façade, letting the hot water sear my skin, the sensation preferable to the crawling that roiled beneath it.

There was a niche in the wall where I found some soap that smelled mildly of wildflowers and beside it, a dry washcloth. I lathered the cloth and began my attempt at removing any trace of that Nomen from my skin.

I'd washed myself three times before there was a knock on the door. Even from in here, I could tell Rhydian was on the other side. And with Eleen just beyond, entirely believing us married, it felt pointless to refuse him entry.

"Come in."

I heard the door open and closed before Rhydian's scent cut through.

Pine and earth. I inhaled deeply not even caring if he noticed. It was a far more welcoming smell than the one I still detected on my body.

"You forgot this," he said casually, tossing a towel on the basin. His eyes followed the movement of my hands over my body, my sense of propriety having vanished after three weeks on the train without privacy. Yet it surprised me that I didn't care.

My skin begged for mercy when I took the cloth for the fourth time to the area around the base of my neck.

Could Rhydian tell how raw I'd rubbed at my skin? How violently I'd been scrubbing away. Could he smell the burst blood vessels just beneath the skin? Was that why he'd ventured in here?

His vice-like grip stopped my hand on my shoulder and my breath stilled. "Give it to me." It wasn't an order, but I obeyed it like one.

Releasing my hold, Rhydian took the cloth from me and slid into the shower, the blond hair on his head, untouched by Lera's taint, turned silver under the light.

Becoming saturated as the water of the shower drenched him, with his white shirt clinging to him like a second skin, Rhydian

leaned around me to turn down the temperature, his breath a feather-light touch as his face came to within an inch from mine.

Fingers gentle, he began combing the hair from my back to softly wipe the cloth over my shoulder. He then wiped the cloth down the length of my arm, turning it over to clean the underside as well. And when he'd done that, he took my hand in his and gently wiped it down as well, along each finger and then over my palm. Upon deeming it clean, he turned his focus to my other shoulder and began the process all over again.

Rhydian cleaned my body. And I let him. I had no idea why. Perhaps in some screwed-up way, I wanted someone else to wash away my sins. He wasn't sexual with how he touched my body, in the way he slid the cloth over the skin of my thighs. It wasn't even sensual. It was precise. Calculated. Like the way my mother would take an apple in her hand and peel away at the skin in one long spiral, as though breaking it even once would ensure the apple wouldn't become the perfectly baked fruit she intended it to be if she so much as sliced into the flesh.

It was the first time a man had touched my body and wanted nothing from me in return.

Entranced by the way the water fell in long rivers over his hair as he cleaned my feet, I had the sudden urge to run my fingers through it.

I didn't.

Upon releasing my foot, his hand moved up the muscles of my stomach in slow vertical movements, swiping over each of my breasts as if they were holy relics. As his focus finally settled on my face, I considered his own features.

The curve of his chin. The angle of his cheekbone. The ridge of his nose. A blessing like Lera's only went skin deep, so I found it unnerving how easily recognisable he was beneath this stranger's face. And in some deep corner of my mind, I wondered if behind this face could he too see me.

I paused my searching on his lips where the smallest of pools had formed in the bow.

"You did good today," Rhydian said, his hand paused by my chin.

I met his eyes, the blue turning cobalt under the glow of the lights. "Except for the part where I let myself get taken advantage of and had to cry for help."

His brow furrowed as he reached around to turn off the water. "That's not what I saw." He exited the shower and upon reaching the basin, he slinked back against it crossing his arms over his damp chest. As the white material stuck to him like a second skin, I realised unlike my Worship Marks, Rhydian had not let Lera erase those intricate blue lines on his chest. Not even for the mission.

I rang out my hair as he reached for the towel. He tossed it casually in my direction, along with his answer. "You didn't ask for help because you didn't need it. I was what, one minute down the street, three at a walk." He tilted his head slightly, his eyes following the path of my hands as I dried my body.

"You called for me so that what happened in The Deadwood didn't happen here." His eyes followed my movements as I tipped my head to dry my hair. "Not that I wouldn't have blamed you if it had," he added as he stepped away from the basin, a hand reaching out asking for the towel. After a moment I gave it to him.

I turned towards the mirror and watched his reflection approach me from behind, goosebumps raising on the flesh of my arms as he draped the towel over my head. A sensation that wasn't entirely unwelcome.

The movements of his hands as he dried my hair were...Nice didn't seem like the right word. Nice entailed a kind of distance between two people. No, this felt intimate. For all his clinical attentiveness, cleaning the sins from my skin, this felt like something entirely different.

He was engrossed in his job, giving the task the kind of undivided attention I'd only ever seen on the faces of the Sculptors on Artist Row.

This felt entirely self-indulgent.

When he had finished, he offered me back the towel. "I know you didn't lose control. But you said something to him didn't you?"

I wrapped the towel around me. "We had a conversation," I said with a smirk.

A single one of Rhydian's brows rose, as if in doubt of my words. "And he just left?"

"One tends to do so when their god orders it."

The broadest of smiles filled Rhydian's face revealing not one but two marvellous dimples, followed by the most glorious chuckle I'd ever heard.

From that space our minds shared, in such a delicious tone that I could feel it low in my stomach, Rhydian purred, ***"God Killer and God Impersonator. Wife, you're beginning to terrify me."***



We left the hotel well into the night. The receptionist, some sort of sympathiser with the Runners' cause had made the dining room we'd entered give the impression a party was in full swing. Loud music and a portion of the supplies were used to make the room appear to be in use whilst the nine of us snuck back through the hotel and into the secret passageway.

Upon re-entering the dark tunnel, I'd discovered why handing over the supplies to the hotel had been part of the mission. Two large vehicles were parked in the dark when we arrived. Large canopied compartments on the back had been filled with all the supplies that we had purchased in Old King's Town, as well as the other Runners that we'd left at the other end of the tunnel.

I sat in the back of the second one alongside Eleen, and several other Brutes whilst Rhydian was required in the first transport with Wade and a few of the Pneumatics. As we drove, they used their blessings to muffle the sounds of the engines. We drove right out the exit and into the darkened forest. The Pneumatics were able to keep up our silent passage through the forest, provided we went slow. It explained why we had to leave the hotel so early in the night.



I'd been informed by Lera when she had returned my face to normal that because the train's route was roughly a twenty-four-hour cycle, it would reach the area of Kensilla we departed from within thirty minutes of the same hour today. However due to the number of supplies we had to get back on board, we had to leave early to unpack everything. The window for re-boarding the train was less than three minutes. Any longer and Kensilla would be notified.

Suffice it to say the anxiety around me could feed a village.

Those paths I'd seen on our forward journey were roads. Used back before the God Fall when Kensilla used to be a Monarchy. The forest had grown so wild over them that only the Runners knew the paths now. The transports travelled on them for close to two hours, the route longer than the one we had taken on foot. We drove with the lights of the vehicles off. The Brutes amongst us, myself included were tasked with using our eyes to search out the forest in case we came across any Kensillan military patrols. We didn't much to my relief, and finally reached the pickup location an hour before dawn.

The Runners spent the next two unloading the vehicles, separating the items into manageable groups and then packing them inside crates similar to the ones Kensilla used for the weekly drops. Everyone knew exactly what to do. They knew where to be, who to talk to, and just how much time they had to do it. Everyone but me.

I spent most of that time taking orders from Filora. Further observation of the woman made me realise, that despite her age and likely years of experience, she seemed to defer to Rhydian when a decision had to be made. The tone he used never displayed that type of relationship though. Curious as to what kind, using my position as his "wife," I used a lull in the activities to ask her.

Filora sat quietly as she contemplated her answer, toying with the water flask she held in her hand. She offered it to me as she spoke. "You know about Rhydian's mother?"

I did. Working in *The Kitchen* with Lily, our conversations, at least on her part always drifted to the topic of family. I knew her name was Eydis. That she was Kosha's daughter and had died when a flu had swept through the train when Rhydian was ten. Sal was only a

child at the time and was ill-equipped to provide the mending that Eydis had needed. I simply nodded.

Filora stared down at her hands with a sad smile. "She was my best friend. Both of us Runners, stealing supplies from towns, sneaking into Hunts to kill the Hunters and retrieve missed caches. Then when we were a little older than you are now, I got into a fight with a collared passenger. He was a former soldier of the Venerable Army sent to the rail as punishment. He must have worked out what we did for the train and thought killing me would prove his loyalty to the Republic." She paused and met my eyes. "You are aware of the law of claiming, yes?"

"To kill one collared is to bear their burden," I answered. It sounded more poetic than it actually was. After my conversation with Eleen in *MedCom*, I'd asked Lily to clarify what the law entailed since I was still confused as to why Wade was being punished for something other passengers were permitted to do without recourse.

It turned out that killing someone outside of the ring meant you intended to take their collar. Which meant you had volunteered to take that person's place on the train and receive their supply. Some did this out of vengeance, others out of desperation to feed their families. But the consequences were always the same. The one who claimed the collar, then wore the collar and the burden of ensuring the train received their portion of rations fell upon them.

But for a Runner, they swear to never take a collar, for their burden is to serve everyone on the train. That is the oath they make. To never harm the passengers.

Wade broke that rule. In killing Bennic, knowing he could never wear the collar, he lost the train much-needed rations. That was why the council had voted to banish him.

However, I believed they were being lenient with his punishment.

"I lost everyone I loved to those collars," Filora said solemnly. "My husband to the Hunt. My sister to a slave camp. Eydis knew that if I was ever caught by a Hunter, if I was ever collared, I would kill myself. I had prepared my entire life to aid the passengers of the train, but I would rather be dead than lose my autonomy." I swallowed a lump in my throat.

"But one does what they need to do to survive and I killed that man. And when I turned my dagger on myself, Eydis stopped me. She snatched the dagger out of my hand and swore to me to take the collar on herself."

My eyes found Rhydian over by the train tracks talking to Jordry. "Eydis chose love," I said.

"Eydis chose love over duty," Filora corrected me. "It is a weakness in the Kanyk bloodline. They do stupid things for those they love. Even to the detriment of their own well-being. She died shortly after Liliya was born."

Filora roughly wiped away the tear that had fallen to her cheek. "So I took up her mantle out here. I recruit, I hunt and I make sure that boy doesn't do anything as stupid as his mother." I was struck by her words, her gaze hard upon me.

"I love that boy like I'd borne him from my own body. I swore to his mother I would protect him. He says you are his wife. I will treat you as his wife. But I will not hesitate to kill you if you betray him."

Every sense I possessed told me she meant it. "Understood."

There was a sharp whistle and silence fell on the clearing until Rhydian shouted, "Train is early. We now have two minutes to load. Move it!"

The whistle had been the signal from a lookout that the train was coming. But it was early and the only reason it was early was to meet a way-station deadline, points in the tracks the train was required to reach at certain times of the day, and there was only one reason to be going at that speed this early in the morning. There had been a Hunt.

With military precision, the Runners spread out. Those who were to guard us ran for the edge of the clearing. The Pneumatics in charge of the supplies began to raise the largest of the crates overhead and float them into position over the tracks, concentration etched into every line of their faces. The rest were left to the Alatus. The smallest of crates were carried into the air by hand, strapped to the bodies of Slyphs like Amida. The other passengers, like Eleen, Mal and Jordy were to be returned to the train by Echoes like Anika.

It was Si'mon's job, as ordered by Rhydian, to carry me aboard.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, feeling his hand tighten around my waist. "Hold tight." I barely had a chance to secure my grip before launching into the sky, the air rushing by as he rose.

He came to a hover just over the tracks. From over his shoulder, between each beat of his rainbow wings, I caught sight of the train.

It was enormous. A great red serpent weaving through dark green grass. I couldn't tell how long it was. It kept disappearing and reappearing beneath the canopy. The morning sun reflected off the black windows like scales.

Something caught my eye on the edge of the wood. A shadow.

I pushed out my senses and felt—wrongness, like rotten fruit and stale blood, hunger and desire and greed.

A figure—no, several figures waded through the trees a hundred meters inward from the clearing. Figures that were misshapen.

Before I could warn anyone, Rhydian yelled, "RABIDS INCOMING!"

Figures emerged from out of the tree line and ran straight for the Runners guarding the clearing.

It didn't feel real what I was seeing. Blessings ignited. Wind howled, fires blazed as the Runners were engulfed in combat with the creatures who had emerged from the forest. They were less men and more Brute. Faces half beast, bodies stuck halfway in transition. One creature whose body was covered in bristly black fur swung out of the tree line and jumped atop one of the Runners and began bounding their fists on the man's chest whilst another, an Echo with black wings and the face of a bat pierced the air with a sonic cry.

The cry lasted seconds. Something, though I couldn't see what tore it from the sky, the creature now shattered on the clearing floor, the cry silenced.

"We have to help them," I shouted but Si'mon flew towards the tracks instead. In fact, all the Runners designated to the tracks were moving closer. "What are you doing, we have to get down there?"

"And do what?" Si'mon's voice was stern, his eyes on the train less than a mile away. "If I stay and fight, if we stay, we miss the train and you die. And I will not have that on my conscience." He dared a look over his shoulder and quickly looked away, his face blanching.

Hovering, with his back to the battle below, I pulled myself up to look over Si'mon's shoulder and saw what had made him pale.

Fur-covered bodies, faces animalistic, fangs and claws bared. Two Bear-Blessed Brutes, both in their metamorphic state were attempting to tear one another apart. One of them was Si'mon's husband, Malden, only discernible because I was familiar with his scent from morning training.

An opening appeared and the Runner's jaw suddenly opened wide allowing him to rip into the creature's neck.

The creature dropped dead and Mal rushed at another, one that was attempting to attack the Runners who were forming protective circles around the Pneumatics moving the supply crates.

Jordry and Rhydian were guarding Wade against a Drake covered head to toe in hard scales. A steel sword in the Bloodhound's hand glinted red with blood as Rhydian sliced it through the tendon in the back of the Rabid's leg. When the man went down Jordry rushed forward and placed a hand on the man's head. It began turning a metallic shade of gold. Alchemist Gold.

Desperation filled the air like fog as the crates continued to hover in the air. The sound of the train on the tracks grated against my mind, as some small part of my brain said run. They could be wrong. Run and be free. Run and die free.

A cry ripped through the clearing as a female Pneumatic was struck by a Rabid, the crate she wielded plummeting to the ground threatening to crash on the tracks below. Si'mon spun around just in time for me to see Wade lash out an arm at the crate. He caught it a meter from the ground, and quickly returned it to the sky as the female Pneumatic turned her attention to the Rabid who'd attacked her.

She positioned her hands out before her as though about to catch a thrown ball, then drew them together in strained precision. The Brute screamed in agony, coiling in on himself before everything he was turned into a bloody pile of compacted meat and bone.

Si'mon turned and faced the oncoming train, cutting me off from watching the fight below. The train ran on magnetics, so no sound

came our way except the rush of air as the giant serpentine prison forced its way through the Kensillan countryside.

The Runners were spread out a hundred meters or more, the highspeed train inching closer towards us. The wind whaled as it pierced the air. Ahead of me, dropping in perfect synchronicity, the floating crates fell. One after the other plummeting down and disappearing through the open roofs of the carriages. Amida and the other Slyphs released their cargos, those too disappearing into the carriages. And then Anika dropped Eleen, the Current disappearing into the train.

"Now," Si'mon said, giving me the instruction that had been drilled into my head an hour earlier. I released my arms from around his neck, and Si'mon lowered me down. Five seconds was how long it was going to take for me to drop through the ceiling of *The Fight Hall*, five seconds and—

I whipped through the air as both my hands were wrenched from Si'mon's grip, and the crimson-enamelled exterior of the train rose to meet me. I collided with the train, something cracking on impact and I immediately began sliding down the curving roof, the smooth surface giving me nowhere to grip.

My arm suddenly lashed out at the train, claws ripping through my nailbeds as they embedded themselves in the crimson material.

I hung from the wall of the train by one hand, a hand I had no control over.

**"Climb Rieka!"** It was Rhydian. He was using his bless—

I climbed, embedding the other hand's claws into the surface, climbing further up the train's exterior until I was lying prone on the roof, my heading hanging out over the open ceiling looking down on a frantic Eleen. Relief flooded her face and she cried out to me to jump the same instant my claws retracted and that tingling sensation I felt in my chest vanished.

Over my shoulder, Amida and Anika were already in the same position on the train, their wings flat against their backs and crawling towards my position. My thoughts drifted to the other Runners in the clearing. Were they close enough to get on?. Why

weren't the women getting them aboard, how were they going to get on the train?

"Rieka!" Eleen shouted again and I looked back down into the carriage. It was a thirty-foot drop at least. But her expression said to trust her.

The train was going too fast to try to attempt any form of sitting. So I slid my body along the edge of the hole, lowered myself until I hung from the edge and I let go.

The same sensation as last time fell over my body. As though I had fallen into a giant pile of pillows. I hovered in the air for a few seconds before I felt the ground arrive beneath my feet. The sensation was so jarring I lost balance momentarily and stumbled forward.

Eleen caught me. "What happened?" she asked, her eyes wide with fear.

Amida's curt voice sounded before I had a chance to speak. "A Rabid Organic."

With her wings flittering behind her, she came to land just in front of me where she proceeded to examine me in quick darting glances, as though she were checking to see if I still had all my original body parts.

"An Organic?" Behind me, Sal approached moving closer so she could confirm what Amida had said.

The Slyph was pissed off. "We were attacked by a group of Rabid's. There was an Organic amongst them. He lashed out a gods damn branch at Si'mon and he dropped Rieka."

"Rapids." Eleen sounded concerned. "Was it a planned attack?"

The carriage had fallen silent around our conversation. Anika who had just landed, her white wings glittering beneath the light that shone through the skylight, approached us. "Perhaps it would be best if we wait for the others to have this conversation."

I took a step forward. "The others, they weren't left behind?" The idea of Rhydian trying to protect his friends and help me at the same time set a stream of guilty thoughts through my head before the wolf inside me growled at them to disperse, reassuring me it was his

job to get me back aboard. Especially since he needed me alive for whatever deal he'd made with the buyer.

Anika's lips shifted into a hard line. She wasn't going to answer me. She didn't know for sure who had made it back aboard.

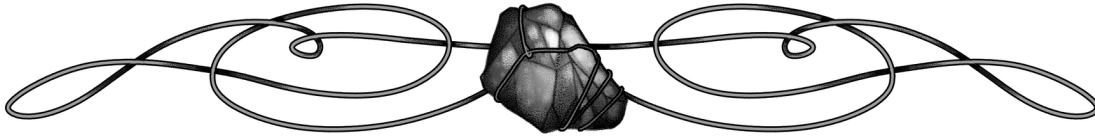
I let that thought settle into my stomach as I watched the passengers sift through the supply crates. According to Sal, I'd cracked another rib. Ten minutes later, mended, my hands full of military ration packs, I saw Rhydian in the doorway of the carriage, looking slightly battered, but altogether uninjured. I took a step towards him, intent on—well, I wasn't sure but whatever reason I'd had to approach him quickly vanished when he called for all the Runners to meet in the council chambers in five minutes.

The council wanted to be debriefed on the run.

He gave me one quick glance and then left back the way he came. The council doors shut soon after.

And since no one but the Runners left the hall, it was clear that wasn't a meeting just anyone was privy to.





## RHYDIAN

My grandfather slammed his cane into the floor signalling the end of the council meeting. The nine councillors rose from their seats and began filing towards the door of the carriage. My Runners sent me looks to confirm what I already knew. We were about to have a meeting of our own.

It wasn't an entirely productive meeting. The council was displeased with the risks we were taking to get supplies, but they weren't inclined to forbid us from going since the Runners were the reason anyone survived lately. And they didn't exactly provide us with any alternatives to the supply shortage. Or come up with any useful suggestions of their own to aid in the mission to free the passengers from the train.

No one even had any suggestions in that regard. Just the same old crap about waiting it out. Waiting out until Kensilla got bored with us. Until they forgot about us. If that hadn't forgotten about us in five fucking centuries they weren't about to do it in the next year let alone the next two months.

And when they didn't like that response, like always they used my position as an excuse to try and force my hand. "You're twenty-five soon," they said, as though I wasn't entirely aware of the curse on

my family. "You'll have to take Kosha's position before then, exactly how much longer can you expect to do this?"

"Until then I guess."

They had not liked that either.

"And what of your wife?" Oh yes, they had surely loved that fact. It took them all one week after Rieka had arrived to attempt to guilt me into quitting the mission sooner rather than later. As though having a wife would somehow make me want to get out of here less than it had when they believed me unbound to the train.

"Surely you wouldn't want her to bring children into the world fatherless?"

"If it's a choice between having children in this prison, and fighting to have them out there, which one do you think I'd choose?"

And like always, the existence of the Runners, how we operated—separate to the whims of the council was once again brought to a vote since more than half didn't approve of the fact we operated outside of their control. It had tied. Four votes to leave us be, four votes to bring us under the council's jurisdiction. The final vote fell to the head of the council, my grandfather.

He'd voted in favour of leaving us be.

As the carriage doors opened, I signalled to Jordry to lead the others out and I approached my grandfather as he stood from his chair, distributing his weight onto his cane.

According to the story my mother had told me as a child, the bone handle had been taken from the leg of his first kill during his first Hunt. Forged by a Marrow that had once been a passenger on the train. He didn't need the cane anymore of course. He'd used it for several months when I was a boy whilst he was healing from a nasty run-in with a Viper. Now it was just for show.

Mother had said he walked with it to project fragility. That people underestimated him when they saw him with it. But I knew him too well to ever believe my grandfather fragile. He knew the true cost of freedom all too well to let himself become weak.

"I didn't expect to have your vote," I said to him.

He shifted his weight on the cane. "Well the last time I spoke out against a decision of yours, you disappeared for three months and

returned with a wife."

"Thank you." I finally managed to say as we made our way through the train. "I know how hard it is for you to go against the council's wishes."

"It is not hard to disagree when their logic is based on fear. People make dangerous decisions when they are scared. I just hope I haven't made the wrong decision based on love." He paused in the middle of the doorway and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Our oaths bind us to this train Rhydian. Just as your mother's bound her. Be sure that your wife can live with yours. Because you cannot change them anymore than we can bring your mother back to us."

His words stayed with me all the way to my room. The Runners were already waiting for me when the door opened, each one taking up their usual spots in my office. Eelen quite unusually had commandeered the best seat for herself. My chair. She didn't move when I entered, she didn't even move when the door closed behind me which meant only one thing. They had been talking in my absence and I was not going to like what my oldest friends had to say.

"Spit it out," I said to the room.

Eelen did not mince her words. "We think when we go on the raid Rieka should come with us."

I refrained from voicing my objection straight away and leaned back against the bookshelves. "Ok, I'm listening."

Amida was the first to speak. "She's a T'eiryash and we've all seen her fight, she can defend herself. Even without using that cursed language."

Mal was next. "She's immune to Toxicants, a fact none of us can claim. Not to mention that she could very well relay messages between runners."

I couldn't disagree with them, but I did not appreciate the ambush. "And in what sphere did you think I would let my wife enter enemy territory and be ok with it?"

Eelen's reply was clipped. "She was just in enemy territory."

"You and I both know that there is a difference, Eelen." I did not attempt to hide the anger in my voice.

Lex whose opinion normally aligned with any decision that led to his departure from the train moved closer to speak. "Can you at least agree that having someone immune to Toxicants would have allowed us to go ahead with the mission in the Old Capital?"

I did agree. It had been that very fact which had forced us to postpone the mission in the first place. Rieka's arrival, however complicated it was for me, was the key to getting us into the factory.

I gave him a curt nod.

"Then you agree she should come with us on the raid," Lera stated bluntly.

"I only admit that she would be of use."

Eleen's annoyance was evident in her words. Even this far across the room I could tell her blood pressure was rising in frustration. "She convinced a Naven he was speaking to his god to save herself, how is that not useful to us?" She'd been eavesdropping back at the hotel, and had seen fit to inform the rest of the Runners before even I had a chance to process what had happened.

I turned to the others. Anika and Jordry, both usually the voice of reason when discussions got heated remained silent. However, with his shoulder strapped, his wings pressed in tight against his back as the room wasn't particularly designed to accommodate someone with his wingspan, it was Si'mon who spoke up.

"If she were any other passenger. You would have gotten Amida to recruit her already."

I kept my voice stern. "But she's not any other passenger. She is my wife."

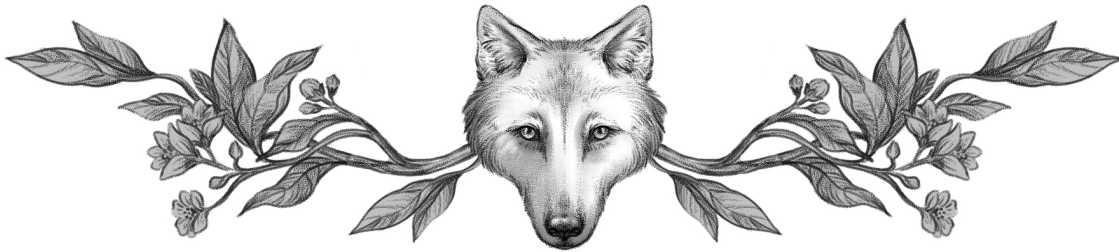
*And the only guaranteed chance we have of getting off this train.*

"Then let her decide." Anika sent a warning glance to Eleen, but the brunette ignored her. "Let Rieka decide if she wants to risk it. Give her the choice like you would do any other Runner."

Eleen glared at me, daring me to pull rank. But she knew I couldn't. Knew I wouldn't. And so I stood there and watched as eight hands rose in favour of letting Rieka make the choice for herself.

The only decision I won when I left my office in favour of more loyal company in *The Gardens*, was that they were going to allow

me to break the news to Rieka myself.



## RIEKA

There had indeed been a Hunt called in our absence.

S'vara, who had been awaiting my return in *The Fight Hall* along with Saskia and Farox informed me that thirty-five people had been drawn. They'd all departed the train at one of the other stations less than an hour before we had left yesterday and it would be some time before we knew who had survived.

It had been a relief to hear that the rest of my bunkmates weren't among the chosen. Whilst Emil was currently working an early morning shift in *The Pipe Room*, Tira was safely sleeping under the watchful eye of Hentirion. Over the next hour, whilst we aided the Runners in separating out the supplies, I listened to the three of them happily recount how Tira had spent the entire day in *The Market Commons* teaching the scholar the bartering techniques of her commune.

I had been hoping to find Lily in *The Fight Hall*, desperate to ask her if I could use *The Kitchen* to bake tonight. I knew there were baking supplies in what we had brought aboard, and I was in desperate need of a distraction—from so many things. However, when I inquired after her to the other passengers on kitchen duty they said that she had swapped shifts for the day on account of Jae being drawn for the hunt. The news made my stomach drop.

When I asked if anyone had seen her since then they had said no.

S'vara offered to join me when I said I was going to look for her, but when we reached her room in the private sleeper carriage, the same room I'd bathed in after my first Hunt, I hesitated at the door. S'vara sniffed at the air noticing what I had. There was pain in the air.

"Lily?" I knocked but there was no response. The tartness in the air stung the back of my throat.

Something was terribly wrong. I pushed open the door and was immediately struck by the scent of fear, and not the type of fear that had the wolf in me crooning.

This fear was a mother's.

Lily's stood hunched over the edge of her tub, her hands braced on the side as she moaned in pain. Her gaze shot to me at the door, and I saw the tear-stained state of her face, fresh tears falling down her cheeks with every heave of her chest. I rushed forward, shouting for S'vara to fetch Sal. I heard her feet beat down fast on the hardwood of the corridor just as I reached Lily.

My name came out in a strangled breath. "Rieka."

"Hey Lily." I tried to keep my voice calm. "Tell me what's happening, is the baby coming?" I rested my hand on her lower back, rubbing circles the way I had seen the midwife in Keltjar do.

Lily grunted out a response through gritted teeth. "Jae's on a hunt. I—" Her knuckles turned white on the tub as a pained cry slipped from her lips. I reached for her hand and when she took it, she squeezed so tightly I could feel my pulse throbbing in my fingers.

"I can't do this without him. He needs to be here."

I squeezed her hand back and directed her to the bed. "He'll be back. You just take deep breaths ok. Sal will be here any minute now."

She sat on the edge of the bed, my hand still gripped in hers. "If they take him, I don't know what I'll do Rieka." She looked at me through pained eyes that were eerily similar to her brother's. I made her take a deep breath with me before I gave her my response. "You do what you have to do to survive another day. Even if the pain makes you want to die. You chose to live to spite them. For your

baby." I wiped away the tears from her cheeks. Lily had such a strong countenance normally, it was easy to forget she was one year my junior.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor a few minutes later, Sal's scent accompanying it. The moment she entered the room, she headed directly to Lily. I moved over slightly to let Sal reach the pregnant woman but was surprised when she asked me to help get Lily on the bed.

I circled the bed and adjusted the pillows for Lily, and was helping her climb atop the bed, her hands in mine when Rhydian's scent entered the room.

Fear tainted his arrival. When I looked over at him standing in the doorway, his gaze was not on Lily. It was on me, or rather, on my hands touching his sister.

"Rhydian!" Lily cried out. He snapped his gaze to his sister and rushed to her side, taking her hand in his as he knelt beside the bed.

"Is she in labour?" he asked Sal, signs of panic in his voice.

I stepped aside as Sal began her work, sweeping her hands over Lily's stomach, her face a mask of concentration. "Men. Impatient creatures." The Organic sighed and lowered her hands over a spot just below Lily's ribs.

We remained silent, Lily's heavy pained breathing the only sound in the room.

"It's false labour brought on by stress," Sal informed us after removing her hands.

Rhydian's focus returned to his sister. "Why, what has happened?"

Lily couldn't seem to get the words out, so I spoke for her. "Jae. He was drawn in the Hunt while we were away."

Rhydian's jaw clenched at my words. And I didn't fail to notice that he avoided looking at me as I spoke. The distinct scent of doubt sliding off him.

*Did he think I was lying?*

"He'll be fine," Rhydian tried to assure her. "Jae's one of the best fighters in this place. I'm sure he's boarding right now."

Lily nodded her head rapidly. Her breathing still a little fast, her heart rate still quicker than it should be.



Sal called out to me. "Rieka can you hand me my bag?" I did as she instructed, gathering the large leather bag and placing it by her hand. She lifted it onto the bed and after unclasping the top, began foraging inside for something, but the mumbling that soon followed made me think she was struggling to find it.

"Can I help?" I asked, stepping forward.

Sal sighed in resignation. "I rushed here and just tossed all the tonics inside. I need the vial that has three vertical bumps down the glass."

It probably took me longer than it should have, but when I found what I thought was the right vial, the contents a putrid pink colour, I handed it to Sal. She ran her fingers down the side over the bumps and smiled.

She handed it to Lily who quickly downed the tonic. "It will take about twenty minutes to take effect, but the labour craps will subside."

The three of us remained in the room, Sal monitoring Lily from a nearby sofa, Rhydian holding his sister's hand, and myself massaging Lily's hand in the place Sal said would alleviate her pain.

When her heart rate had just about returned to normal, her body succumbing to sleep Rhydian finally spoke to me.

**"Why were you here?"**

I looked over and found Rhydian staring at me, the look so full of contempt, that some invisible string I didn't know was there tightened around my chest.

I kept my eyes on him, trying not to let the cold expression on his face unsettle me. *"I came to ask if I could bake and found her."*

**"You could have asked one of the others. Why seek her out?"**

Gently, I placed his sister's hand down on the bed. *"Because Lily is the one who asked the council to use the ingredients on my behalf—are you interrogating me?"*

His face seemed to grow hard. **"Should I be?"**

I stood from the bed and walked over to the centre of the room and waited for him. Lily remained asleep as Rhydian released her

hand and approached me. He stopped no more than two feet away, his body tense, expression still cold.

*"What the fuck is wrong with you?"*

***"I just don't understand why you had to seek out Lily right after we returned?"***

I could feel myself scowling when I responded. *"You might not know this since we haven't been married very long, but I have to prevent myself from making shitty choices. And last I checked fucking someone whose not my husband because I was just assaulted by some prick with a superiority complex was not a good choice."*

Rhydian scoffed. ***"We could have an open marriage."***

*"Right, because our being married was such an easy sell in the first place. Whatever issues you're having right now, you need to get over them. I needed a friend after all the shit that just happened and since Lily is a Runner I know who wasn't on the run, I wanted to talk."*

Rhydian's fear scent spiked. And I suspected that if he wasn't in complete control over his heart rate, it too would have spiked. The two always went hand in hand.

***"You wanted to talk to her or punish me by hurting her?"***

he said, his words bitter.

*"Why the fuck would I hurt Lily?"*

***"For using my taint on you."***

My palm collided with his cheek before I could stop myself.

Rhydian stood there wide-eyed. Shocked. Though not as shocked as I was.

I'd just slapped him, for insinuating the very thing I once contemplated doing.

"What just happened?" Sal had risen from the sofa, her attention now on us.

I couldn't bring myself to speak.

Whatever ideas Rhydian had conjured in his head that had turned his features hard had vanished. Now all I saw was anguish. He thought he'd wronged me.

*I am a fucking monster.* I strode from the room immediately needing to be as far from Rhydian as possible. But the moment I passed through the doorway, I was greeted with a crowd of curious passengers all waiting to hear news about Lily. They saw me, saw my state and instantly started to worry.

The scents were a chorus of fear and anxiety. Their voices soon joined and tried to pry answers out of me that I couldn't provide.

Rhydian's scent drew closer.

How could I explain what I'd done when even I didn't understand it?

I pushed further into the crowd when my name was called. But not by Rhydian.

Big brown eyes stared at me in a panic. Jae. He'd survived. Black hair, scuffed cheeks and a blood-splattered shirt told me he must have come straight here and not even bothered to go to *MedCom*. He took one look at me and blanched, his voice cracking as he spoke. "Lily, is she..."

I rushed to him, squeezing his trembling and bruised hands. "She is fine Jae. It was false labour. She's asleep now. She'll be so happy to see you." He gave me a small smile as he squeezed my hands before dashing into the room.

I caught sight of Rhydian just inside the doorway and found a tightness in my chest that hadn't been there before. A pain that had me fleeing for *The Fight Hall*.

For hours I fought, sparring with anyone who would let me fight them. When Farox found me there still sparring with a pair of very exhausted passengers, I hadn't realised I'd missed two meal times. He offered to take their places, but after three hours, he finally quit on me, claiming I was avoiding sleep because Rhydian and I had fought and that it might help if we fucked and made up.

Until that moment I had not realised I was avoiding sleep. But the idea of going to sleep after what had happened between us in Lily's room was not a pleasant one. It was not that I wanted Rhydian in my bed, one warm body was no different to the next. I'd done it on and off for three weeks. It was the fact that I had somehow

convinced myself that since Rhydian was back, and would be sharing my bed, I would not have to dream.



*"Say you love me," he whispered in my ear, his voice low.*

*"I love you," I said breathlessly. He hastened the collapse of my resolve, his fingers unrelenting in their fervour. I sucked in a breath at the sudden surge building within me.*

*"Say you're mine."*

*"I'm yours."*

*He kissed me, the words absorbed by his lips, consuming them into himself.*

*The well inside me cried out for freedom, his hand having finally reached my soul and pulled until all I could feel were his lips on mine and the tether between us pulled taut, threatening to snap taking my sanity with it.*

*He growled. "Say my name."*

*"No," I teased back, seeing the fire in his eyes aflame at my being so near to the climax he so hungrily wanted to see on my face.*

*"Say my name," he pleaded again.*

*"No." I smiled, relishing in retaining what little power I had left, forcing him to take me higher, to move his hand slower once again. I was not ready. It wasn't enough. I wanted more. I wouldn't say his name.*

*I heard a snap. A branch breaking. Anger. The smell of anger.*

*I sat up, alert.*

*A black wolf stood ten feet away in the long grass. Her golden eyes locked on mine, the picnic basket rocking between their feet.*

*He called my name.*

*I twisted to face him.*

*His starlit eyes were wide. His lips moved, my name on his tongue.*

*Great crimson ravines appeared across this chest as though invisible claws had angrily raked through his flesh, the blood splattering my face.*

*He collapsed into my arms; my name coughed up through blood-stained lips.*

*"Please," he wheezed, luminous tears trailing from his terrified eyes. "Say my name."*

*"I can't," I sobbed.*

*The air filled with the sound of ripping flesh and those invisible claws raked through his body once again, his life blood pouring from the open wound in his neck as a scream ripped from my lungs.*



I'd left the partition to the bunk open, in case Rhydian decided to share our bunk tonight, but instead of him, I awoke to the startled faces of my bunkmates. And not just them. More than half the passengers in the sleeper carriage shifted in their bunks, awoken by my scream.

In the bunk opposite, Tira sat wide-eyed and stared at me from over S'vara's shoulder. "Are you ok Rieka?" she asked in that soft spoken way of hers.

I gave her a small smile, an attempt to reassure her everything was fine, even if it was the fifth time in three weeks it had occurred. I motioned for her to go back to sleep but Hentirion spoke up in the quiet of the sleeper.

"You really are a T'eiryash, aren't you?" The scholar's voice was so awestruck he almost didn't sound like himself.

"Hentirion," Farox said in a pleading tone. So very unlike him.

"What's an Teary—" Tira fumbled over the word.

Saska, likely realising he wasn't going to get any more sleep, jumped from his bunk. "They're nearer to the gods than the rest of

us," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "More divine than human."

S'vara sent him a scolding stare. "Don't fill her head with nonsense."

Saska ignored her as he leaned back against the alcove window and pulled a fruit from his pocket. "Pazgari history says they were blessed with taints so powerful the gods made them divine warriors, allowed them to live on the Isles. It is why they speak Gods' Tongue."

Tira frowned as she looked at the Pazgari. "But the God Isles fell, what happened to them?"

Saska rotated the red-skinned fruit in his hands. "They were hunted to extinction, some say." A blade appeared out of nowhere and he cut into the fruit, the air instantly engulfed in that familiar citrus scent.

*Where did he get Deogn Sweet Limes?*

His blade paused and Saska caught my eye. He offered me a piece. A piece I very quickly declined.

Shifting to sit on the edge of the bunk, I rubbed my hands over my face and took a deep breath. "And what makes you think I am one, Hentirion?"

"Thirty years ago I was a soldier in the Fire Infantry in Halinon," the old scholar said. "There was a man, no older than yourself that was brought in to aid the war effort. His taint was so powerful that sand turned to glass beneath his feet."

I suspected I knew where his story was going.

"Killing Devos because of their taints was outlawed centuries ago in Halinon. Even if they were suspected of being a T'eiryash." Hentirion continued. "And rather than cleave his tongue from his body, the generals believed he would better serve them as a weapon." Then both his gaze and scent changed. A flood of pity pressed down on me from his bunk. "His taint consumed him, turning him into the very thing he controlled, and he vanished from the world."

I'd known for years humans feared my kind because of the danger our words caused, but it wasn't until I lived in the Citadel that I actually had a name to put to it. The book I'd stolen from the library

in the Celestial Offices had made it clear that my kind was not looked upon favourably by anyone. Our Blessings were fraught with complications. We were feared by humans for our words and by Blessed because we did not fit the mould so many of them have lived their lives trying to break out of. Worse still, our lives were short. Almost all T'eiryashta recorded to have existed all seemed to either vanish or die within a thirty-year life span. What frightened me about Hentirion's story was how closely it resembled the tales in that book. The power, the lack of control, the age.

What frightened me was how close the story was to my own life.

Emil, who had been quiet until now, finally climbed from the bunk he shared with Saska and joined him on the floor. "And how exactly does that confirm Rieka is a T'eiryash, Hentirion?" He gladly accepted a piece of the fruit from his lover's hand.

"When he dreamed, the soldiers all heard his voice in their heads. Just like tonight," he answered solemnly. "Rieka, you scream in your sleep."

I didn't know what he wanted from me. If I could change what I was I would have.

"Is this your way of saying you are afraid of me?"

They wouldn't be the first people to be, they wouldn't even be the first person today that acknowledged they feared me. I hadn't been able to get the look on Rhydian's face out of my head all evening. The coldness in which he had regarded me still made my chest feel tight.

Hentirion frowned, his eyes softening. A moment later he was climbing from his bunk and crouching down in front of me. He offered me his hands and I took them. "I'm afraid for you my dear. No one should be alone in this world. Even creatures like yourself. I just wanted you to know that I know."

"Aren't you afraid of me, that I'll..." I hesitated, unable to bring myself to speak of the more prevalent fear. So I asked about the more obvious fear. "That I'll bespell you?" Why did I not feel any fear or animosity coming from them? This wasn't normal. At least not for me.

S'vara shifted, moving from her bunk to sit beside me. "Do you bespell people often? Have you ever bespelled any of us?"

"Absolutely not," the words hurriedly escaped. "I've only ever—" I paused abruptly.

"Only when what?" Hentirion asked bluntly. "When have you felt inclined to speak the words?"

I hesitated, scared this genuine concern would vanish the moment I spoke. But I did answer. I explained how I'd used the spell to save Tiny in Keltjar, how I'd used another to hide from the Hunters, and how, when the mask-less Hunter had touched me...How I used Gods' Tongue on him before my blessing manifested and I ripped him apart.

Hentirion remained silent, his expression becoming one of contemplation.

It was S'vara that spoke instead, forcing the old man out of his thoughts. "You should have more faith in your tain—your blessing, even if it is different to what is expected of our kind. All you've said is that it has protected you when you needed it to."

Her words were kind, but they didn't change the fact nothing good had ever come out of my use of that language. They just made me feel more like a monster. The world would be safer, they would be safer if I never spoke Gods' Tongue again.

I leaned into S'vara, allowing her to brush her head against mine, her affection welcome after the horrible two days I'd just had.

Farox turned in his bunk and rested on his elbow. "Now you should ask Hentirion why he really wanted to confirm it."

The old man looked as though he would have liked to smack the Drake up the back side of the head. I pressed him when he didn't indulge Farox.

"I'm a scholar's assistant. It is illegal for me to be a historian in Prea. But..." He hesitated.

"Why are men so slow," S'vara chastised him before turning to me. "Hen wants to write a paper on you."

*So obviously they have talked about this at length before.*

"Why about me?"



"Not you. About T'eiryash," Hentirion clarified. "I've always believed that there was, as Saska said, a closer link between them and the gods, and would provide the realms with a greater understanding of why our paths deviated from divine worship to scientific."

"Devos aren't allowed to study at the Schools of Engineering," Emil noted, his Preat far improved since he'd arrived. "How would you even publish?"

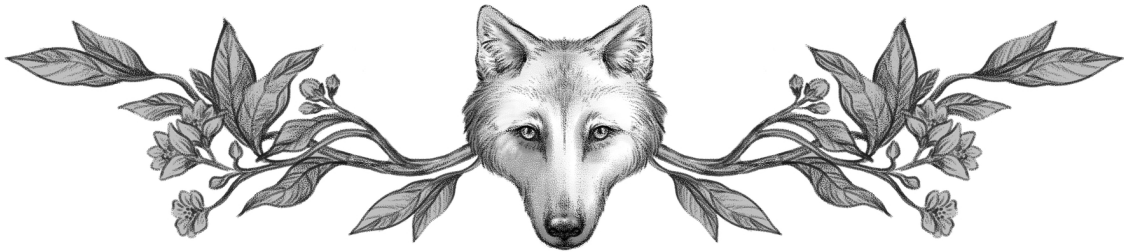
A gentle smile touched Hentirion's lips. "You'd be surprised to know how many people are on our side in Athus. They are the founders of Preat Progressivism after all."

I wanted to say no. I'd had many sleepless nights because of the terrifying contents of that book on T'eiryash. But the idea of someone like Hentirion creating something that would be of help to someone like me was—it would be priceless.

"You cannot use my name. That is my own and I will not share it with the world. That is my only condition. Accept it and I won't object to your paper."

The man's honeyed eyes lit up like gold, filling with pure joy.

Sometimes I forgot how fast a situation could change with a simple conversation.



## RIEKA

That morning the new work roster had been posted. I was now to report to Sal in *MedCom*.

When I arrived right after morning training, which Rhydian had been very absent from, Sal had been waiting in the doorway for me, her leather case at her feet.

"How's that chin of yours, I didn't get to ask yesterday?" she inquired when I stopped in front of her. I absentmindedly touched the now-healed skin of my chin. It had healed so long ago that I'd barely noticed. Even the rope burn around my neck had healed.

"Good. The salve did the trick."

"Told you it would." She stretched down, her hand searching for the leather and lifted the case towards me. "Welcome to morning rounds."

I should have been less shocked that Sal knew her way around. But since I'd met one other blind person in my life and they were mended very quickly after we'd met, I didn't have much else to compare it to.

Sal walked the halls as well as any other passenger. She knew exactly which carriage we entered and who she was after once we were there, stopping by the very bunks of the passengers she was there to see.

The only time I saw her trip was because of a toy that was in her path. She'd stumbled, reached down and after feeling the teddy in her hands knew exactly whose it was, chastising them for not taking better care of their belongings.

Sal used her blessing on an old woman with a sprained ankle, a man with a freshly healed scar that Sal made disappear at his request, and half a dozen scrapes, bruises and breaks from that morning's sparring session, including one I'd incurred on a Prowler myself. It made for awkward conversation, especially when the woman continued to hiss at me for being within her vicinity.

Sal also chose to administer more of those green tonics. There were others too. The orange ones she handed out for those with runny noses. A red one was given to a woman who was trying to conceive whilst a purple one was given to a woman who did not want to. She even gave out a few yellow ones to passengers who struggled to sleep at night.

The last passengers we saw, however, Sal could do nothing for. We'd travelled to the back of the train to the carriage where the Aquatics slept. Two children, ages nine and twelve that I recognised from Hentirion's classes were sick. They were the ones I'd noticed were missing. They were pale, the scales that existed on ones this young flaked around their necks and brows. According to the words their parents spoke to Sal, they couldn't get them to drink much, and they were barely eating. Dark circles around their eyes made them look almost hollow.

Sal's hands hovered over each of their chests for a few moments, the pupils of her pale green eyes expanding to consume all colour before returning to normal. She combed the hair back on the children's heads as they rolled into the covers of their beds.

Words of reassurance and comfort were given to the parents as well as Sal's word that a new tonic would be with them in the morning.

Sal said nothing to me as we walked back to *The Greenhouse*. Once there, she gave me instructions on which plants to locate, what to cut from them and how much. The other passengers who were tending to the hydroponics and food crops continued with their

work ignoring us as we stood at a work bench where Sal had me cut and crush what we'd collected.

Her hands were so careful and so deft in her work. If I had human eyes I would not have noticed how the plant before her grew incrementally under the influence of her blessing. Bio-Architecture was a rare skill for an Organic to possess. Not even those I had been acquainted with in Deos were skilled in it. It had to be taught, but from what I knew of the passengers, Sal had been the only Organic onboard since she was a child. "I can feel your eyes on me Rieka. What is it you want to ask?"

I continued to crush the alborn weed stalks as I spoke. "Why the ancient remedies?" Herbal medicine was considered antiquated in Deos. I'd never met anyone who thought it useful except the Kanahari.

The plant before Sal sprouted a new stem as she responded. "You may have noticed I'm the only Organic on the train."

I nodded and then realising my mistake I replied aloud. "I have."

"Kensilla is considered to possess the largest population of Organics on the continent, in part due to the fact they have state-of-the-art medical facilities in every major city in the Republic. And Organics in bad situations seek out the Republic in the hopes of a better life."

I gathered the stems in my hands and placed them in a small bowl I had put aside for them. "Even though everyone knows that crossing into the Republic is a death sentence for a Devolved Human?"

The word still felt odd on my tongue. I'd decided during Rhyidian's first absence from the train to become accustomed to everything unfamiliar to me. That included using the language of the kingdom I intended to reside in when I was finally free of this prison. Devolved Human was the name the first Prean Emperor had declared as the title for my kind.

"Even then." Sal waved her hands over the plant in that oddly orchestral way Organics did causing the plant to grow a little more.

"And the other part?" I asked.

She slid one of the other bowls I'd prepared earlier across the bench to rest in front of me and handed me the pestle. "Like you, if they're found, instead of collared they are recruited."

"You mean enslaved." My knuckles turned white as I crushed the seeds in the mortar.

"Perhaps. We're not entirely sure. Organics tend to every mending needed within the Republic. And their medical goods are sold on the black market for an exorbitant amount of money. We can't afford those and the supplies we purchase under the Runner's false identities aren't nearly enough. So the Runners find me old healer manuals whenever they travel beyond the Republic's borders. And anything I can't find in those, I create myself."

"And if you have the seeds, can you grow anything?"

"Within reason. Nature is balanced. To create a new herb, I must know the properties of fifty varieties of plants just to have a specific outcome if I am to use it to heal. And there are so many plants that are just not compatible with one another.

"For example, to induce a coma for an injury that required more time to heal, I would use thatcher's wart. It gives me three months to mend a patient. But to make the effects irreversible, to ease someone's pain because they are beyond my capabilities, I'd need to splice the seed during germination with vallow apple. Anything else and the death is excruciating.

"If I have water, I can make any seed become what nature intended it to be. But to make a new seed, I need a garden."

I couldn't decide if I was terrified or impressed with her. Probably both.

"This doesn't feel right." Sal leaned in slightly. "Tell me, are the petals on this flower blue with orange streaks or just blue?"

I looked down at the plant before her. There were indeed petals forming on the short stems. "They are blue. At least they look blue to me." The idea of Sal knowing the colours was a little confusing.

She leaned on the table swearing under her breath in Seja. "It won't be ready for tomorrow."

"The tonic for the Aquaticus children?"

"Yes." She took a deep breath. "Let us just hope they'll live through the night."

But they did not.

During the night Sal was forced to declare both children dead. The train come morning was filled with the melancholic sound of over a hundred Aquatics lamenting. The children's bodies were dropped from the train as we travelled across the bridge over Slaver's Bay.

When I accompanied her to *The Aviary* the next morning, it was such a contrast to the rear of the train that it may as well have been another country.

Sal tended to a young teenage Alatus who was undergoing his chrysalis transformation. His breed of Brute were wingless until puberty when their bodies developed a hard shell on their backs that accommodated the growth of wings.

I stood off the side watching as Sal's hands floated over the surface of the shell. I'd known two Slyphs like the boy as a child and of the two, only one chose to undergo this process to join The Celestial Guard when he came of age. The other chose to destroy their Chrysalis as an act of devotion to The Celestials.

A few more weeks and the boy would have delicate opaque moth-like wings sprouting from his back. His hair may even change colour from the pale blonde he naturally possessed. When that happened, he would be taken under the wing of another Slyph, his father maybe and be taught to fly right here in *The Aviary*.

It was such a large space. The glass dome overhead extended well beyond the ceiling height, providing those within a sense of the outside world. I'd asked Hentirion if he knew what purpose the room served and he'd theorised it was a kind of temple for the ancient Kensillans to observe the God Sphere. Now the space served as a training ground for littles and a second home to winged Devos.

The floor was covered in thick green grass, both entries planted with wildflowers, an array of pinks and blues and yellows. Trees stretched up towards the skylight, reaching for the sky they would never touch, their limbs climbing the wall, growing at beautifully obscure angles.

I spotted Saska leaning under one of those trees just inside the carriage. He watched a small group of littles, Slyphs no older than five or six with wings like Amida's attempting to fly by jumping off a small grouping of rocks in the centre of the compartment.

"That part was always the hardest," Saska said when I stopped beside him. He rarely spoke in Prean, preferring his own tongue to those across The Narrows, but his bunkmates had been the exception.

"That young, you're only just learning what fear is. When jumping off of things used to be fun. When you get to that age," he added, indicating to the observation deck on the second level. A group of Alatus teenagers were staring off the edge, their wings nervously fluttering behind them as an older winged couple instructed them.

"You're worried you're going to get hurt. You're worried when you jump your wings aren't going to beat like they do when your feet are firmly on the ground."

I looked over to the littles. They were jumping up and down like little fleas, their wings clumsily beating at the air. The moment one rose, a beautiful string of giggles would fill the air.

"So what's the trick?" I asked him, daring a glance at his back where I knew the scars were.

"To convince your feet you never left the ground."

Just as I was about to leave, he spoke again, "You and Emil are both from the Ecclesiarchy. I understand why you fled. Controlling priesthood and religious fanaticism are not my thing either, but Emil, he—"

"He still practises Celestisum," I said, confirming his path of questioning, noticing for the first time the pastel-green regrowth of hair around his ears.

"Yes. He's off now doing something he called Intercession." At Saska's words, my chest tightened.

*Was it that time of year already?*

I pushed the thought down for a later time. Saska's eyes were still on the flyers. "He's told me that before he was captured by the slavers, he was banished from Deos. Do you know why?"

"You ask as though all Deogns know one another," I said jokingly, but his face remained serious, the hard lines of his jaw clenching.

"I ask because you two are more familiar than you let on."

I was honestly shocked no one else had noticed until now. A quiet kind of acknowledgement had fallen between Emil and I, one we never spoke of aloud. But I shouldn't have been surprised Saskia noticed. He and Emil were more married than Rhyddian and I were.

I took my time, glancing over at Sal and finding her still ingrained in her work so I answered him, careful with my words. "That eyeshield he carries around, we call it a pesai. His marks him as an Artisan. In Deos their work is praised by all, some are so well known they can be raised to the level of The Devout and be commissioned by the Celestials themselves."

A single dark eyebrow on the Pazgari's face rose. "Emil's met your Celestials?"

"He is a Smith. They create all things mechanical in Deos. Elevators, rail systems, art, works of architecture. All in the name of the Celestials. What they are forbidden to do is create life."

His forehead furrowed. "How does a Smith create life?"

"The media called it an Automaton. The Offices called it sacrilegious treason—to create life against the will of the gods."

Saskia's scent shifted to annoyed, though his expression gave away nothing. "But if he created it, does that not prove that your gods aren't all-powerful?"

I watched a little girl lift off the ground four feet and float back down in a fit of laughter. "Why do you think he was banished?"

"Why not kill him then?"

"Pain," I told him. "The worst fate a Devoted can suffer is to know their creators have abandoned them and let them live with that knowledge. That no prayer they ever spoke will be answered."

Saskia asked no more of me after that, so I returned to waiting for Sal who upon finishing her examination of the young man, had me accompany her through to *The Private Sleepers*.

"Wait here," she ordered me, taking the leather case from my hands and proceeded to walk into one of the private sleeper



compartments. As the door opened a familiar fragrance escaped accompanied by an equally familiar voice.

"Morning Sal, before we start would you mind, someone's been pinching them."

I turned just in time to see Kosha walking towards the door to close it and saw Sal lifting her hands to a small fruit tree by the door. As Kosha closed it, greeting me in the Seja way before he did, the branches on the tree bloomed under Sal's blessing.

Never had I expected to encounter the red fruit so far from home. Even after the door had closed, I found myself lingering in the scent of Deogn Sweet Limes. I hated that I found it comforting.

It took another scent to finally snap me out of it

A smell I'd been waiting a year for.

*Kharee!*

It was accompanied by the scent of parchment, and ink, and charcoal.

With my stomach taking the lead, I followed it. Down the sleeper to the stairs that lead to the lower lever rooms and into another corridor. There were no rooms here, instead halfway across there was a door that bore a sign that read "Storage Closet."

It was indeed a storage cupboard. But there was no parchment, no pens and no kharee. Yet I could still smell them, as if the scent was seeping through the floors. After a minute of searching, I found myself with my head wedged between a broom and a mop, my nose pressed up against the timber wall at the back of the closet. I ran my hands over the surface until my fingers snagged on a small square in the wall. The button I found inside gave a metallic click when I pressed it and the wall popped open.

Through the gap, I saw what looked to be a library. There was a wooden desk covered in open books, a wall covered in parchment papers and on the floor, just behind the desk was a sack. There were words printed on the side. My Pazgari was still very limited, but I recognised one word. Raysem.

Raysem was the kharee capital of the world, the original producer of the bitter bean beverage.

*Which lucky prick managed to secure themselves kharee on a fucking train!*

My kharee-deprived mind made me open the door another inch.

Right there, basking in the morning sun that streamed through tall windows in the compartment, was a big, beautiful copper tub.

I took another step forward. "Rieka?"

Sal's voice cut my reverie short. She had finished with Kosha. I quickly fled the small space of the closet, closing the door behind me, an idea forming.

If Rhydian had no intention of keeping to his promise of granting me the use of a tub. I would have to commandeer one myself. It wasn't a crime if I didn't steal it.



I found Emil in *The Pipe Room* after Sal excused me for the day. Celestial doctrine dictated that three times a year we were to perform Intercession. To pray to our gods on behalf of another. But Emil couldn't do that. The practice required a party of two.

He knelt on a blanket on the lower level, a row of twelve copper figurines lined up before him. Each one a representation of the twelve Celestials of Deos.

I stood there watching him as his lips moved, mouthing a prayer I'd spoken so many times in my life I'd memorised it by the age of ten. He stopped and glanced at me over his shoulder. "I didn't think you'd come if I asked."

"I didn't expect to find you without your eyeshield," I said, taking the space beside him, moving into that familiar position.

"I traded it for this." He opened his palm. Inside was a copper coil. His token, the item he'd chosen to represent himself.

He then offered it to me and spoke the very words I had been avoiding since we had met.

"May the Treasured One shine bright, may their words be headed and may my own words find welcome ears. Will you accept my token for Intercession?"

Tears welled in my eyes. "Emil. I do not serve them anymore."

His hands dropped to his lap in defeat. "Then why did you come?"

"Because," I said as I wiped at my tears. "You're not supposed to spend Intercession alone."

I knew how hard it was to leave Celestisum. For twenty years it carved itself into my very bones. I'd left it so violently that a part of me still felt like something was missing, a phantom limb.

It did not surprise me that Emil felt abandoned by them. But what broke my heart was that he still had hope.

"It feels wrong." He stared down at the coil in his hand. "To have this day pass without prayer."

I knew he'd have to make his own choice about our gods, but at least for today, I could make an exception. "Perhaps there is someone else we can pray to."

I opened my hand to request his token. Slowly he placed his coil in my palm and waited.

The custom was to speak the prayer aloud, I just hoped, even though Taren never taught me how, his invisible gods would accept my words. "I accept this token on behalf of Emil Kal and ask that the Eldertides hear his prayer."

Emil looked confused, but I urged him to pray as he'd intended. He took a breath and began.

"I pray for my parents and that they haven't suffered in my absence. I pray for the one who felt it was his duty to reveal my sin and ask that he find true purpose in his life instead of seeking the downfall of others. I pray for my bunkmates. For Tira to heal and for her antlers to grow strong so that she may run free again. For S'vara to one day return to her ship and her ropes and for Farox to return to his sisters. I pray for Hentirion to receive the acknowledgement he deserves and for Saska. I pray he will fly once again. I pray for Rieka. I pray she finds those she has lost and that she once again finds someone worthy of her devotion. And I pray for the passengers

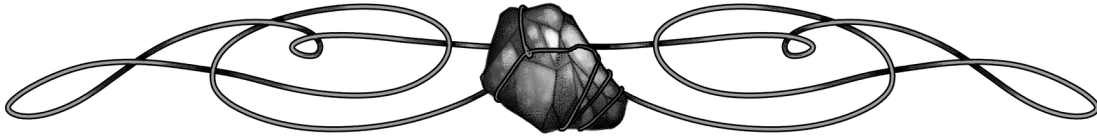
of the Kensillan Territory Rail. May they find their freedom. This I ask of the...The Eldertides."

As Emil motioned to end the prayer, I silently added one more name. *I pray for Emil. That his kindness is rewarded.*

The moment I'd said those words I felt it, the breeze that shouldn't exist in this windless space. We were alone in this carriage. No Pneumatics and no wind and yet something tickled my cheek.

Emil sucked in a breath. "Did you feel that? It felt like someone touched my face!"

I handed him back his token with a smile.



## RHYDIAN

My mother stared down at me from the wall. It felt as though her eyes bore straight into my very being. A testament to my skill that even as a sketch on paper I could still feel her knowing gaze.

It hadn't been my intention when I'd drawn her. Lily had always wanted pictures of our mother, ever since we were children. Even knowing her very image sat encrusted in gold in *The Gardens*, she'd always wanted more. But this one was different. This one was for her child, for my little niece or nephew. A portrait that fully encapsulated who our mother was. I hadn't fully realised until this moment how realistic the piece was. How at any moment those soft features could turn hard with warning, to scold me for being so reckless. And how uncannily similar those features were on my sister's face.

The door opened, startling Jae from his position on the floor—who was in the process of trying to string up the baby's cradle.

Sal entered the room, and then right behind her, hair draped over her shoulder and wearing that buckskin vest that was a constant reminder of our morning in Keltjar, was Rieka. She caught my eyes and for a moment I had actually hoped her inner voice would greet me with some snarky comment. To ask me why I hadn't slept in our bunk the last two nights. Or ask why when I'd made it a condition, I

hadn't turned up for morning training and been unable to explain where I had gone for the night. But as expected, she looked away, giving her attention to my sister, following Sal as she sat on the bed to check on Lily.

For twenty minutes, Rieka ignored me. I sat on my sister's sofa to give Sal room to work, and even then in perfect view of her, she not once acknowledged me.

In the end, I couldn't take her silence any longer. *"I need to apologise for yesterday,"* I finally managed to say, hoping my inner voice conveyed my sincerity.

Rieka's response was clipped. ***"No need. You obviously believed me to be a danger to Lily."***

I kept my voice calm. *"Because the last time I used my taint on you, you threatened to kill me if I ever did it again."*

***"A perfectly sensible conclusion to jump to when seeing me with your pregnant sister,"*** the words laced in sarcasm.

I shifted the cushion, finding the sofa no longer comfortable. *"You're scolding me after I said I was sorry?"*

***"Technically you haven't said sorry yet. And I never said I would accept it."***

My inner voice groaned in frustration. *"You are impossible. I wrack myself with guilt for the last two days because I felt like shit accusing you of something so heinous, and you can't even accept my apology."*

***"You should apologise to me for yesterday. I wanted nothing more than for Lily and the baby to be alright. But you weren't wrong about me."*** Her tone was so casual, that I thought I'd misunderstood her words.

*"Come again?"*

Rieka finally looked at me from across Lily's bed, those pale blue pools somehow darker. Haunted.

***"I told you I'd be honest with you Rhydian. I did think about it. As soon as I learned Lily was your sister, I wondered how I could use her against you. It just turned out I wasn't as cold-hearted as I thought."***

For a moment, I felt vindicated. It hadn't been irrational to believe her at her word when she had taken every opportunity to demonstrate she kept it. Her every action since we'd agreed to this bet had been with one goal in mind. To seduce me to secure her freedom. And she'd just admitted she'd do anything to secure it.

I should have been storming across the room and throwing her against the wall for wanting to harm Lily. I should have dragged her out of the room and locked her in the cells until the month of Marian, marriage façade be damned.

Instead, I found myself sinking further back into the cushions of the sofa as a single memory surfaced, snuffing out my anger as if it were nothing more than a candle blown out by a swift breeze. A memory that reminded me of what I was keeping from her, what I had been willing to do and had done to secure my people their freedom.

Leaning my arms across the back of the sofa I asked, "*So you don't intend to gut me in my sleep then?*"

An amused smile rose on her face. ***"No, I don't intend to gut you. I want to thank you. As much as I detest your taint. I'm grateful you didn't let me die. Even if it was for selfish reasons."***

Of course she would think that. Why wouldn't she? It was perfectly reasonable to believe I saved her life for the sake of my deal with the buyer. But in that moment, seeing her fall from Si'mon's grasp, the idea of her colliding with the train and getting injured in the fall...

The thought that I might have to watch as the collar on her neck burned the life right out of her because we might not have been able to get her back to the train before the beacon died.

It irritated the fuck out of me.

*"I guess we're both selfish creatures,"* my inner voice admitted.

For a moment, her expression softened. ***"At least we're goal-oriented."***

The laugh I let slip was unexpected. For both of us. Her smile faltered for a moment before she too laughed. Soft and light. It made my chest tighten, in a new and unusual way.

But that smile quickly vanished with the sudden quickening of a heartbeat.

My eyes shot to Sal as her hands loomed over my sister's large belly. She gave my sister a quick smile that didn't quite reach her eyes and withdrew her hands. "The good news is the baby is healthy."

Lily's breathed out in relief as she exchanged a smile with Jae. But it was Sal's expression that made me uneasy. "What's the bad news?" I asked.

"The placenta still hasn't moved."

Jae stood, the baby cradle discarded on the floor as he walked to his wife. "But, you said it should have moved by the third trimester. She's thirty-two weeks."

Sal shook her head. "I said should move. It hasn't. A vaginal birth is now no longer possible."

Lily was trying hard to control her heart rate, the sensation of her Bloodwork tickling my senses. I watched as she breathed in deeply trying to contain her panic, but Sal's next words made her pale.

"The baby will be breech."

I watched as Jae squeezed my sister hand, a terrified expression shared between them before Lily raised her gaze, her eyes locking with mine.

"What are her options?" I finally asked.

Sal opened her mouth to speak, but it was Rieka who answered. "An abdominal birth."

Sal confirmed Rieka's words, to which Jae asked if Sal couldn't just move the placenta herself.

"Cellshaping on pregnant women is dangerous enough. But doing it inside the womb, in all likelihood her placenta will abrupt and they'll both bleed out. And neither of your taints will help," she said, directing that last comment at me and Lily.

"Can you create something that would shift the placenta?" Lily asked as the tears began streaming down her cheeks.

"I don't have the right plants. We just ran out of sakror root as a painkiller, and I don't even have the right equipment." The expressions on my sister and her husband's faces were distraught.



I saw Jae look to Rieka a moment before he spoke in desperation. "Can your Gods' Tongue do anything to help her?"

Rieka appeared startled, her words coming out in a stutter. "Jae, I-I barely have a hold on my taint, I—"

"Even if Rieka knew a spell, I wouldn't let her," Sal interjected. "We have no idea what the lasting effects of Gods' Tongue would be on the baby."

I watched as my sister clenched her jaw before speaking, her hand squeezing Jae's tightly. "Am I going to die?"

Sal slid her hand across the bed in search for my sister, who took it firmly in her own. "No. Because I'm going to get those supplies." Sal turned her head in my direction as if those pale green eyes could see me. "I'll find them in the medical facility on the raid."

"Absolutely not!" I shouted, appalled that she would even consider it.

Rieka's voice jumped into my head then. "**What raid?**" I shook my head as though the action alone would rattle her from my thoughts.

Sal continued to make her case. "Rhydian, you and I both know I'm the only one who can identify the medicines I need. The Medics do not label the products so I can't even describe to you the items I require. I need to come."

"You know how dangerous it is. Wade wouldn't allow it." It was a low remark, evident by the furious expression on the mender's face.

"Wade controls me as much as you control your wife. Besides, Wade isn't here, and he won't be back in the time we'd need the medicines," Sal was quick to remind me.

**"Let me come."**

I snapped my attention to Rieka as her inner voice continued. **"You know I have the training Rhydian, take me on this raid and let me protect Sal."**

*"Why would you help Sal?"*

**"I'd be helping Lily, who, unlike your notoriously absent ass, has done nothing but treat me like a person and not something to be protected for fear of damaging the merchandise."**

I'll admit, that stung.

"What's happening?" Jae said from beside Lily. "Is this that thing that she can do? Are they having an entire conversation in their heads?"

"Yes. I believe they are, and it is quite rude," Lily said, drawing Rieka's startled eye. "Speak aloud. Now!"

I knew what the result was going to be the moment I answered my sister. But was it ridiculous to hope they saw reason? Lily continued to glare at me, waiting for my answer.

Rieka just had to say the next words aloud, giving me no recourse. "So it's ok for me to go on a run when you want but not when I offer?"

I huffed, rising to my feet in frustration.

"Someone speak now!" Lily demanded.

"I offered to go on the raid to help Sal and Rhydian is flatly refusing." The words flew off Rieka's tongue with ease.

My sister scoffed, a clear indication she was unimpressed with me. "You didn't tell her?"

"Tell me what?"

I kept my eyes on my sister as I directed my words to the woman they all believed my wife. "I hadn't found the right time."

Sometimes, given her current state, I forgot Lily was still a Runner.

"Tell me what?" Rieka repeated.

Eyes like my mother's, both disappointed and impressed at the same time Lily told Rieka what I could not. "The Runners voted to bring you on the next raid. They were just waiting for Rhydian to tell you."

Rieka slowly turned her gaze to mine. "Glad to know someone sees my worth."

Sal and Rieka left a few minutes later, followed by Jae. Lily had asked him to find her something to eat from *The Kitchen* since she was craving something sweet. Lily always kept a stash of things for the pregnant women aboard the train.

As soon as the door closed, I waited for the scolding. It didn't come.

Lily just stared at me. Her eyes burned into the back of my head as I walked over to their small personal bar and poured myself a drink that burned on the way down.

"What?" I said finally, unable to stand her glaring any longer.

"I showed you everything that occurred in your absences. Everything she did that I could observe because you asked me to keep an eye on her for you. And I did that because you're my brother and I love you. But you're being a truly shitty husband."

I downed another glass.

"Rhydian, she's making the effort. Why aren't you?" My sister's sincere words were blades carving the lie into my skin.

*Because we're not married,* I wanted to tell her. Because I've sold her to one of those purist fucks who think giving themselves a prestigious title like Naven takes away from the fact they enslave other human beings. That if I do not do this my niece or nephew will be born in a prison they may never leave and their parents likely won't live to see them walk. That I'm no better than those fucking slavers and the thought of wanting to touch Rieka after making that deal makes me want to cut my own hands off.

*I committed an unforgivable act. One I doubt even you would forgive sister.*

"I know you Rhydian. I know it is not love. Not yet at least. However this relationship occurred, Rieka is here now and I can see she cares for you, that you both care for one another. But if you don't see it going anywhere, break it off and let her be with another."

*Oh, how I wish I could.*

I took another swig. When I was finished, I gave Lily my sincerest smile. "I'll try harder. I promise."

I intended to keep my word. But I had work to do right then. I had a mission plan to alter. So I sent word to the others that we needed to go over logistics. Amida was to leave the train at midday to scout out the location for the best routes to the medical facility and Anika was to go with her as backup. Jordry would provide ground support.

We spent the better part of the morning going over the mission to make sure nothing would go wrong. An impossible task in reality. We

went over the contingencies that now included Sal and Rieka, and triple-checked the list of supplies we needed to bring back on the train.

I had blueprints permanently tattooed to my eyeballs by the time we finished, and the only way to get rid of them was to order Si'mon and Mal to spar with me in the hall.

It was early afternoon when I finally made my way back to my office, the kharee cravings more enticing than the thought of seeing Rieka again after Lily's room. Entering the corridor, though not stopping until I was certain I couldn't sense anyone approaching, I entered my office through the closet.

My senses detected the intruder before I saw them. The Void pouch I'd hidden in the closet, was meant to keep the old library I'd commandeered as my own personal quarters a secret from the other passengers, but it was useless against the one person who was immune.

*Rieka.*

Lounging in the tub, her hair pulled off her face in those braids of hers, the colour of her roots so altered since the first time we'd met that her hair could have been mistaken for black. Her naked body reflected back at me through the water in large ripples. It was there that I saw the position of her hand and what she had been doing right before I entered the room.

"Shit, sorry," I mumbled and turned to leave.

*Wait, what am I doing?*

I turned back around and strode over to my desk, flopping down into my chair, the entire time feeling the weight of her stare. "This is my room. You should be the one to leave. You're trespassing." I leaned back in an attempt to feel relaxed. Something I most certainly was not.

Rieka cocked her head in the tub, her voice oddly amused. "I'm in the middle of something."

"Well then finish up," I said, trying to sound nonchalant about the fact I'd walked in on her masturbating in *my* tub.

"You don't like it when people do things that surprise you?" She arched her back in the tub so that her breasts bobbed just above the

water as she moved her hand between her legs.

"In my experience, people rarely surprise me." A wicked smile appeared on her face at my words, followed by the smallest of bites to her lower lip. Still dressed in my sparring pants, and currently shirtless Rieka's eyes trailed down my chest.

"You want me out of here, then help me finish."

Now that surprised me.

Of course, it could have been a game, another move on her part to seduce me, to move me one step closer to achieving her agenda. But it could also—

"Help you finish?" Curiosity taking over, I leaned forward resting my elbows on my knees. "And how exactly would you like me to do that?" My gaze drifted down her chest, lingering where she rested her hand on her right breast.

"The same way you did in *The Fight Hall*. Take over."

I sat upright. "You want me to puppet you? Why under the Sphere would I do that?" Rieka responded to my shock with a shrug.

"Because I asked you to."

I brushed a hand over my chin expecting to catch my beard and finding only stubble.

"I'll let you control me under one condition," she continued. "You let me feel it. None of that black-out shit."

This was insane. And fucking stupid. If I let her feel the puppeting, I'd feel it too. Hemopaths had mental safety mechanisms in place specifically to ensure we didn't feel those we controlled. If every Hemopath that performed puppetry felt the pain they inflicted on their opponents there would not be any of us left. The only Hemopath I knew who did it was Lily because she claimed it led to synchronicity with Jae when they were intimate—a conversation I would have preferred never to have had with my baby sister.

"You want me to make you come? Without touching you?" It was an enticing offer.

"Otherwise," she said, continuing in a tone that was both nonchalant and a fucking dare. "You just have to watch as I take my ever-loving time doing it myself."

"We do this, and I won't release you until you come. Not until you beg me. Agreed?"

Rieka studied me with a predator's gaze, her eyes raking down my chest like those claws hidden beneath her skin. Then with an amused expression, she lifted both hands from the water and threw them over the sides of the tub to recline. "I've begged for one thing in my life Rhydian. It would be interesting if you can make it two."

"Agreed?" I repeated.

She cocked her head again staring at me from beneath her long white lashes, she the predator and I the prey. "Agreed."

I stood from my chair and moved it across the library until I was directly opposite the tub. I sat and centred myself, opening my senses to the room. Rieka's heart was a beacon urging my taint towards it as if they were tethered to one another. Her heart and mine. The tether snapped into place and I waited.

One heartbeat. Then two.

On the third beat, our hearts beating as one, I dropped my walls.

Everything came in a rush. The heat of the water, the chill of the air on her shoulders, the sensation she felt between her thighs that teetered between pleasure and pain, and the ever-present urge to make herself writhe in that pleasure. I felt everything she did.

I'd known Bloodhounds who needed to perform the physical acts to control; to punch the air to make their puppet punch, but I'd never needed to. That kind of Bloodwork was always for show.

I sensed her body, the way the muscles responded to commands and a thought occurred to me. I found the place in her brain I needed and blocked it.

"What are you doing Rhydian?" she asked curiously, no doubt now feeling the lack of sensation in her arms.

"We agreed that I would let you feel it. Not that you would feel like you were the one doing it." I moved one of her arms back beneath the water until her hand rested on those thick black curls between her legs. Slowly, in small back-and-forth movements, her fingers slid between her folds as her other hand roamed the already sensitive skin over her stomach.

She kept her eyes on me, her mouth slightly open.

Gently, two of her fingers parted her folds whilst her middle finger found her clit. I made the motions slow. So slow that Rieka's eye rolled back into her head just as I felt a throbbing sensation low in my own body. My breathing faltered, my grip tightening on the arms of my chair. The sound caused Rieka's eyes to flash open.

I don't let the moment last. Her roaming hand reached her breasts where she cupped one before I made her lightly feather her fingertips over the skin around her nipple. Her eyes closed once again as the finger on her clit began making long circular movements, applying pressure with every pass it made.

Her breath hitched in her throat as our heartbeats increased. The sensation that I felt roiling just below her navel and just above her pussy built. I watched as a word started to form on her lips, and I waited for it. She caught herself, biting her lip as she pinched her nipple between her thumb and forefinger, the sensation sending sharp pings of pleasure through my chest.

I increased her movements until her back arched against the wall of the tub giving her the perfect angle to reach down and insert two fingers into her pussy. She moaned at her own penetration; the sound so exquisite that my cock grew hard.

I knew she was fighting it. With each movement of her fingers, she cried out in pleasure, her body writhing in the tub. Rieka craned her neck back over the tub's edge as the speed with which her fingers fucked her increased. Each time I felt it within my own body, the edge, that precipice of ecstasy I slowed her movements only to build it again seconds later.

***"Rhydian."***

Her inner voice was breathless, delectably so. "Yes Rieka," I said aloud, my own voice barely controlled. She took her entire lower lip into her mouth as I increased the movement on her clit.

"Please," she moaned aloud, her inner voice, a perfect echo of her plea.

I gave her what she craved, delighting in the way her body quivered against the release of that pressure. I rode it out with her until our chests were heaving then I released her.

With her arms now her own once again, Rieka's hands floated to the surface, her fingers splaying out on the water as if the last remnants of her orgasm persisted in those very muscles. Finally relaxed, she opened her eyes and stared at me.

Was that awe I saw in her expression? I would have sworn on the very blood in my veins that this woman had never experienced that kind of pleasure before. It was gone a moment later and Rieka abruptly stood in the tub, the water splashing over the side and onto the hardwood floor.

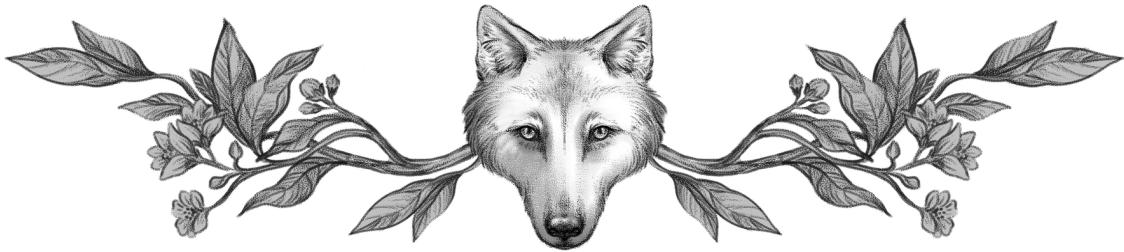
She must have been so determined to bathe in private that she would have had to cart the water here on her own. There were no water pipes in this room.

Rieka climbed out of the tub and quickly wrapped herself in the towel she had brought. "Thank you for your assistance," she said, barely glancing at me from over her shoulder.

I relaxed back in my chair; the cockiest smile I think I'd ever had could not be pulled from my face as I said in reply, "It was my pleasure."

Rieka cleared her throat before bundling her clothes off the floor into her arms and quickly striding out of the library like her ass was on fire.



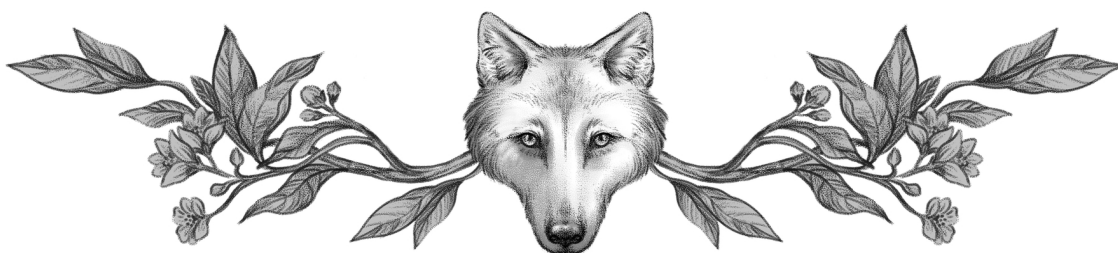


## RIEKA

The door closed behind me and I leaned against it to ground myself, to feel the hardwood beneath my bare feet. I concentrated on my breathing, on the inhale and the exhale, on the cold air passing through the train and over my damp skin.

I looked down at my hands buried in my clothes and raised one. A sense of unfamiliarity fell on me as I gazed at it. Remnants of the exhilarating high that had just occurred because of those hands still lingered in my body. Because of him.

I let out a quivering breath. *What under the Sphere was that?*



## RIEKA

Three days after agreeing to let me come on the raid, we jumped from *The Abattoir* doors somewhere along the Mesali Gulf exactly four hours before midnight, the scent of the ocean spicing the air.

We were met by Filora and her Runners, but unlike our last encounter, she had nearly five times as many Runners with her. Amongst them, were Runners wearing what looked like Kensillan Army uniforms.

Years ago when rumours from the south spread through Deos that Kensillan forces were trying to invade, propaganda posters started to make their rounds. Smuggled across the border by Kensillan spies in an effort to recruit citizens to The Republic. Not that they had many sympathetic ears in the Ecclesiarchy. Every piece of propaganda was turned in by a citizen within a day to prove their devotion. Those posters were the only reason I knew the uniforms were Kensillan.

There were at least a dozen Runners dressed in those dark forest green uniforms. The men wore long sleeve button-down jackets fastened with a brown belt and matching green trousers tucked inside calf-high brown boots, hair combed back with something that smelled like beeswax. The women wore nearly identical uniforms, but instead of trousers they had floor-length pleated skirts, and their

hair was tied back in sleek buns at the base of their necks, making their features look quite severe.

A stone dropped in the reservoir that had become my stomach. The raid was on a military compound.

I contemplated seeking Rhydian out, but he'd already told me that he was leading this mission, that this was his brainchild and my job was to stick with my assignment. If there was something he needed to know, confirm it with my lieutenant and they would tell me if I should pass it on to anyone. I'd spent the last three days, with invitation of course, learning to detect their minds on the train in case I had to use my blessing to send a message. But Rhydian was adamant that I wouldn't need to, not if everyone stuck to their assignments.

I kept quiet.

We walked no more than thirty minutes east of the tracks, I picked up the scent of the compound within half that time. At least a hundred humans, three times that number of Blessed surrounded by the scent of electricity and steel. The Kensillans didn't believe Void traps were necessary here I'd been told. Once we reached the outer perimeter, we split into smaller groups to head to our ingress points. Sal and I were joined by three other Runners, and not a single one I recognised courtesy of Lex and Lera altering all our faces for the mission.

Then the largest one gave me an order to follow. I recognised his voice.

*Wade.*

I took a single calming breath, recited the recipe for making buttermilk and I followed.

We came to a stop by one of the posts that supported the security fence surrounding the compound. The male Runner that had accompanied us approached the post. I could smell the power running through the fence but saw nothing but spiderwebs in the area before us. He lifted his hands outward as if to place his hands on a wall, the blue energy of a Spark igniting between his fingertips.

He looked over his shoulder at Wade who nodded for him to begin. The Spark bent low, his hand meeting the base of the metal

post. The entire space of the area before him pulsed, and what I thought was a spiderweb was instead thin threads of metal wires that crosshatched between this post and the next. The Spark then slid his hand across the bottom and then straight up.

The blue pulses that ran through the wires began to re-route themselves away from the Sparks hand, as though he'd placed it in the flow of water and created a kind of doorway in the pattern. When he stepped away I could see the electric pulses were now moving around the area where he had just stood, arching and pulsing around what looked like a dead space in the fence.

The female Runner with us approached. She held out her hand which began to glow from within. She was a Bright. As the luminos she emitted grew brighter, I was forced to shield my eyes. When I opened them again a Shard was in her grasp.

Brights in Deos were always designated the Citadel as their Civic Service location. I'd pass them every seventh day on my way to prayer, long luminos shards in their hands as they stood on guard duty. I knew what those weapons were capable of. So when the Bright approached the dead area of the fence, it wasn't hard to fathom what she was about to do. The Shard in her hand burned right through the metal threads.

Sal remained at my side her hand on my arm as Wade stood and walked through the newly created doorway. Using my senses, I listened as he walked a few meters into the compound.

In Kensillan he said something like, "You, boy, come here." I heard a second set of feet, followed by the sound of a breathy gasp. A moment later Wade was carrying someone over his shoulder back through the hole in the fence.

The Spark pulled out some technical device from his jacket and pointed it at the collar on the unconscious man's neck, after which they ran over to me. He directed his device to a small bean-sized disk in his hand and then placed it on the inside of my collar beside the other one already there, the one that duped my location.

"This will fool all their tech, convince them you wear his collar."

"But I'm a woman?"

The Spark shook his head. "Won't matter. All they see are Thralls. In your case, a military serf. Now put on his uniform."

I did as I was told, stripping off the young man's puke-coloured clothing, which was halfway between what I'd worn in Old King's Town and what Wade wore.

Wade and Sal were already standing by the hole when I finished lacing up the Thrall's slightly too-large boots. In his hands was a set of shackles, an item used on Devos by Humans to make their Blessings inert. In Deos we called them Inhibitors and used them on the Disavowed when they were marched to the coast for banishment.

Wade took a deep breath before locking them around Sal's wrists. Judging by the way she didn't recoil at their touch, I'd would bet that they too were inert.

They leaned in close to one another, foreheads touching in an intimate display.

"I forbid you from dying," Wade said softly as Sal caressed his face, her fingers carefully tracing his features as if she could feel his real face beneath.

"And I, you," she said as he took her fingers in his hand and brought them to his lips.

As he kissed them, I quickly turned away, annoyed at myself for being so curious about someone I hated.

I hadn't been thrilled when I found out Wade was to accompany me on the mission, even with his banished status. I'd wanted to complain, but the mission now included Sal, and since he had seniority, I was stuck with him.

I replicated the hair style I'd seen on the female runners masquerading as officers, securing it in a low bun and waited for Sal to take up her position beside me. I grasped her arm, not only to be her guide but because I too was now masquerading—as her Serf escort, and we followed Wade through the fence and into the compound.

Amida had been sent here days ago to determine our best path, and unfortunately, the safest path through the camp to the facility was from the western wall and directly through one of their

courtyards. So the other part of my job on this assignment other than aiding Sal, was to help Wade navigate to our destination. As much as I wished I wasn't in the man's head, I reached out with my senses and alerted him to anyone on our path to the medical facility.

"*Stop,*" I told him when two soldiers walked ahead of a corner we needed to turn. I limited our conversation to as short of syllables as possible. When we had finally crossed into the small courtyard, I warned both of them that a group of soldiers was going to walk past us. Sal and I instantly lowered our gazes to the floor as the soldiers approached.

They all saluted Wade as they passed. Not a single flare of suspicion from any of them, which meant Rhydian's plan had worked. Every Runner who wore a high-ranking officer's uniform would also wear the face of that officer, or as close to it. Disturbing but effective.

Wade came to a stop outside the doors of a stone building, the guards on duty coming to attention. He said something in Kensillan I didn't entirely understand, his words faster than I was used to, but the guards moved aside and opened the doors for our entry. We crossed straight into a room that looked remarkably similar to *MedCom*. A woman perhaps in her thirties with mousy blond hair sat at a desk at the back of the space looking at an image that hovered over her desk, projected from a miniature techboard inlaid in the wood. She waved a hand at the board sweeping away the image when she noticed us approach. She took one look at Wade and stood, the small cylinder that hung from the belt around her waist swinging like a pendulum.

Wade spoke before she did, his words once again too fast for me. Dressed in a long green coat, but no uniform, the woman looked at us with a discerning eye. "Very well," she replied much slower. "You're the translator Thrall?" she added, addressing me flatly.

"I am, mistress," I responded using the words Eleen had instructed me too. If not of Naven stature, sir and mistress were the terms to be used on any military personnel not wearing rank insignia. She was neither.

She said something to Wade again and he turned and took a seat by the wall. "This way," the mistress said in a rather bored tone as she headed for the doors to the left of her desk. I adjusted my grip on Sal's arm as Wade's inner voice called out.

***"You keep her alive she-wolf. Be the fucking T'eiryash. Bespell those bastards into mice if you have to. Protect Salryah."***

I looked back over my shoulder. Wade was sitting rigidly straight in that chair, the perfect military soldier. Only his scent gave away his fear.

I didn't bother explaining to him that transformation was beyond my capabilities, a power only exhibited by the gods themselves.

Sal and I followed the mistress into a long wide corridor, the walls a stark white metal, making the space feel quite cold and soulless.

***"Can you smell anything in here?"*** Sal whispered, even in her thoughts. I replied at a normal level, a silent message that no matter how loud we spoke with our thoughts we wouldn't be heard. *"It's too clean. A lot of chemicals, but I can smell traces of plants."*

That didn't seem to reassure her. She just smelled more nervous.

We passed three sets of doors, including a large pair of double doors before the woman slid what I now knew to be a key card through a device on the wall. A green stripe meant low clearance zones, a yellow stripe meant normal clearance, and the red stripe on hers meant high clearance. We might need that.

The door we followed her through was to a small examination room. A desk sat in the corner, filing cabinet beside it, a sink beside that and in the centre of the room was a medical cot. In that moment I thought Sal was lucky not to see it. Worn leather straps hung from the sides of the cots' frame.

The mistress swept her hand over the desk's surface, causing another set of floating images to emerge—a row of letters. She began typing something, then withdrew the miniature tech board from the desk. She didn't even glance at me as she ordered me in Kensillan to instruct Sal to sit on the cot. Sal did as she was told. I was lucky this woman spoke slower than Wade, or else Sal would have had to translate for me. The idea of a three-way translation

was not ideal but it was the only way this was going to work if I couldn't keep up with the Kensillan.

From her desk, without looking me in the eye, the mistress asked me questions. Where was the Devo found, what is her estimated age, what is her threat level, and what is her Affliction, a word I'd been warned was Kensillan for blessings. I fed the mistress the story and the lie. Sal was assumed to be a Brute but we were unaware of which type.

If we revealed Sal's Organic status, she would be taken away immediately for processing but if we said she was a Brute, a medic would have to mend her eyes after the examination to make that determination and that would be my opportunity to take her out.

It had worked. The woman suddenly looked up from her notes glancing over at Sal curiously who immediately, began to fidget on the cot under the woman's gaze. Could she perhaps feel the way in which the woman stared at her, like she was an attraction at a carnival?

The mistress appeared intrigued by Sal's blindness.

"Well," she posited. "That is to be expected for the wild ones. No sense to seek out the arms of the Republic when they should." As she lifted her hands, I took a step back preparing myself to strike knowing I had one chance to stop her getting her hands on me.

She then hesitated. Reaching down to the pin on her coat that claimed her as a medic, she pressed on the centre and spoke into it. Someone responded on the other end.

I repeated her words in my head trying to make sure my own translation was correct. Another medic was coming?

"*What now?*" I asked Sal when she confirmed I'd heard right.

**"We wait."**

The mistress continued her observations of Sal's face right up until I heard a pair of footsteps outside the door. The first person who entered the room I recognised. He was the Organic from the camp, the one who was forced to save the Rabbit-Blessed Terrestrial from death.

The mistress then stiffened, her scent altering to one of repulsion and what smelled like that of a cowering dog. Not something I often

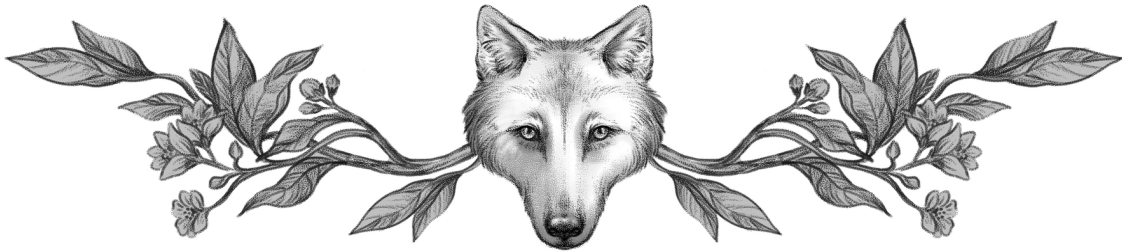


smelled on humans. I only saw the sharp points of the officers' boots and the thick material of the skirt before they appeared in the doorway. In that moment I was awfully glad not to be wearing my own face.

Even with my eyes cast away, ensuring I never directly looked the officer in the eye, I knew I recognised her courtesy of the scar that stretched across half her face.

"Collector Alvera," the mistress said, addressing the slaver with respect. "What brings you to medical?"

Her words were just as slow. Calculated even, as though she were putting on a play and intended for not a single word to be misheard or misunderstood. "I overheard your words to Kodee here and thought that it was about time I saw just how far along his training had come. I understand you have an unidentified Brute."



## RIEKA

Fear overtook the medic's scent. She pulled at the sleeve of her coat. "You honour the creature with your presence." The mistress then addressed the other medic. "Kodee, please proceed with the examination."

I watched the young Organic walk towards Sal and take her shackles in his hand. Sal flinched at the contact. From the corner of my eye I could see the smirk rise on Collector Alvera's face.

Kodee as he'd been called, addressed Sal slowly, his Kensillan barely any different from my own. "I'm going to take your shackles off. We have a Collector with us so running away will be pointless. Nod your head if you understand."

I translated to Deogn as per our ruse and Sal nodded, trying to ignore the way Alvera's eyes trailed over me as I spoke.

"I need you to remove your clothes."

I repeated Kodee's orders whilst my inner voice asked her if she was sure about this.

***"This was my plan. I can do it."***

An old memory started to crawl its way up from that dank cavern I'd buried it in. Flashes of gossamer fabric and milky water threatened to infiltrate my senses as my skin began to recall the rough texture of coral sponges and the slickness of scented oil.

I forced them back down as Alvera, hands clasped behind her back, a shocklance hanging from her hip crossed before me to circle Sal.

The mistress cleared her throat. "I'll leave these three in your capable hands Collector. Kodee, I'll be in Procurement when you're done here."

"Yes, mistress," the young Organic replied, all life drained from his tone. Then the mistress was gone and fear in the room was overpowered by Alvera's mere presence. She had the same scent as the Nomen from the alley. Alvera wasn't just a slaver—she was a predator.

Sal continued to strip off her clothes whilst I could do nothing but stand with my back against the wall and watch as this woman, this Collector circled Sal's increasingly naked body. Which in and of itself was not uncomfortable for someone who'd lived on the train their whole lives, privacy was hard to come by. But even I could tell Sal was ill at ease. Alvera stared at her like a hawk did a mouse. A viper waiting to strike.

Kodee shifted uncomfortably under Alvera's gaze, the scent of disdain and hate ebbing off him in waves. "What of her health?" Alvera asked, almost sweetly.

She hadn't even had the scar tended to. Just the eye, as though she thought it made her look like some kind of hero.

"Peak health. No injuries internal or external," he replied without looking at her.

"Except for her eyes," Alvera corrected him as she rounded behind Sal.

Kodee apologised. "Forgive me, Collector—except for her eyes."

"You're so new at this how can you be certain she is entirely healthy?" Alvera took a step closer to Sal, a move which made Kodee's scent spike. This was not a good sign. I lifted my gaze slightly and found the woman bent before Sal, her face inches away, as if her only desire in life was to breathe the same air.

Her words came out in a manner befitting one giving a gift. "I will break her in."

Kodee stuttered. "But Collector, w-we don't know what she is. She needs to be registered, classified, and collared."

With deathly precision, Alvera straightened her posture and looked over her shoulder at the young Organic. Her expression was as ice cold as her voice "Are you insinuating a Collector is incapable of making those judgements?"

"No." Kodee swallowed. "Collector."

"Wonderful," Alvera said in a terrifyingly cheery voice. "Dress her and we'll be on our way."

I needed to stop this. But my thoughts were going too fast. *Think Rieka. Think.*

*Kodee!*

I reached out to the young man praying to the Eldertides, because there wasn't a god that I knew that would aid me.

*"Kodee, where is Alvera taking the girl?"*

The Organic froze by the cupboard where he was fetching a medical robe for Sal.

*"Think about this voice and speak back in your mind."*

His inner voice shook. **"Are you a god?"**

I contemplated revealing myself to him, but it was safer if he just thought I was a disembodied voice. Less chance of being discovered.

*"Far from it. I witnessed you in the camp before here, I saw you save that Terrestrial from death. You are a good man. You must now do the same here. Save that girl."*

**"I cannot. Alvera has claimed her. She is as good as dead."**

*"Then aid the Serf. She will deal with Alvera."*

He gave me a quick glance over his shoulder. **"It's impossible. There are Toxicant Traps throughout this entire building. She won't be able to use her taint."**

*Yet he could?*

As Kodee turned back around, the robe in his hand, I noticed the item swinging from his belt. A little round cylinder. Identical to the one which the mistress wore. There must be something in there that counteracted the traps already in the building. That must be why his blessing worked in here.

*"You let me worry about the Serf. Are the traps built into the walls?"*

***"No. They hide them. It makes it easier if they need other Serfs to use their taints inside. They just remove them from the rooms in sealed containers."***

*"Where's the one in this room Kodee?"*

Alvera suddenly snatched the robe from his hands and started dressing Sal herself, eagerness dripping off her like a burning wax candle. Sal flinched from the contact, her hands moving to cover her breasts only to be grabbed by Alvera and forced into the robe, her hands making long overly zealous strokes of Sal's arms.

*"Now, Kodee!"* I shouted. He flinched but responded. ***"The top drawer by the Serf, but it's locked."***

I spun around just as Alvera had begun to drag Sal towards the door. Reaching for the draw, I grabbed hold of the top and began to pull back, feeling the metal bend and warp as I did.

I heard Alvera stop and turn as I reached into the hole I'd created in the filing cabinet.

*"Just what do you think you're doing Serf?"* Alvera sneered as I pulled the cylinder from the barren drawer.

She saw what I'd taken and still holding onto Sal, dragged her petite form across the small space trying to reach me before I reached the sink. But she was too late. The moment my hands passed beneath the faucet, a sensor was alerted to my hand's presence and the water instantly turned on, pouring into the open cylinder, destroying the solution inside.

*"Now Sal!"*

An angry guttural scream ripped from the tiny woman as her free hand reached for Alvera's scarred face. A thousand tiny worms wriggled under the Collector's skin, the sudden sensation causing Alvera to release Sal entirely.

I watched in awe as Alvera's eyelids fused closed. Where her lips had once been now only skin was seen. Like a wooden doll whose features had not yet been carved, the woman clawed at her face. But with every tear, the skin re-fused, until her muted screams

turned to strangled cries. When Sal finally released her, Alvera fell to the floor in a limp dead heap.

She never even reached for the shocklance.

I unclasped the weapon from the dead woman's hip and called to Sal. When she didn't answer I called out to her aloud.

"Fern" was her mission designation. Mine was White Wolf. No real names were permitted on the raid.

"I'm fine," she replied, her hands fidgeting with the seam of her robe.

Kodee moved, causing Sal to react, the much smaller woman crossing the room in four strides reaching out to the other Organic. Both their hands were outstretched, an unusual scent filling the room that reminded me of rotten eggs.

"Fern, Kodee helped us!"

She straightened abruptly, then asked for her clothes. Kodee immediately lowered his own hands and gathered them up, tentatively placing Sal's clothes in her outstretched arms.

"I don't know how much help I gave. That's an executable offence." His face paled upon looking down at Alvera's featureless one. "That Sergeant outside would have seen her come in."

I noticed Sal's fingers still on the buttons on her shirt at his words.

"When she doesn't come out, he'll wonder why. Then we're all dead," he quickly added, his face beginning to blanch as he continued to stare at Alvera.

"Kodee, how many people are in this building?" If he'd been telling the truth about this place being Void trapped I couldn't tell. I'd felt nothing crossing into the building. I'd just have to hope he won't lie.

"Just us, the Sergeant and Medic Mistress Ceroy," he answered.

"Why didn't Ceroy come when Alvera screamed?" Kodee averted his eyes at the question. That told me more than I needed to know. The scream was a normal occurrence when it came to Alvera.

I changed the subject. "That sergeant, go get him."

Kodee retreated a step. "What? No."

I locked my eyes on his. "*Do as the Serf says*," I ordered him.

Kodee departed the room leaving me to help Sal. I wasn't of much help though. Sal was already pulling her boots back on by the time

Wade came into the room.

"All Steady?" he asked Sal after noticing the dead body on the floor.

"Steady," she replied, though I doubted very much that was the case. Feeling the need to change the subject, I turned my attention to Kodee.

Upon returning to the room with Wade, he'd backed himself right into the corner, his gaze jumping between the three of us and the dead body.

I called his name, causing his head to snap up in surprise. "Where is Mistress Ceroy?" I asked him.

"In Procurement but I don't have access, only she does."

"Won't need it." Wade, now holding an antique timepiece, began counting down.

"Three, two, one."

The room went dark as every mechanical device in the building came to a resounding halt.

The raid had begun.

The lights in the room turned red, signifying the facility's backup system had been initiated.

As much as I didn't like the man, our survival now depended on our working together so I told Wade about Medic Ceroy and after speaking with Kodee, Wade decided we needed to wait for her. There were too many ways the plan could go wrong if we got caught out in the open.

We didn't have to wait long. I heard a set of doors mechanically open a minute later, followed by a pair of heels clicking on polished stone. The card reader beeped and a moment later she entered. Ceroy barely got a word out before Wade used his blessing to immobilise her. He ripped the air from her lungs, the act causing her to fall to the ground in an unconscious heap. Wade placed the cuffs on her wrists, then took the shocklance from me and struck her with it for good measure. My body recoiled at the memory of that feeling.

"You two go and find the supplies," Wade ordered. "I'll keep the medics here with me. You might trust him but I don't." I didn't like

the way the Pneumatics' hands twitched at his sides so I sent Wade a private message.

*"Sal is safe because of him Wade. You should know that before you plan on killing another innocent man. Sal's only alive because of Kodee."*

I tried not to give the young medic another thought and left the examination room with Sal and Medic Ceroy's key card in my hand.

We found two more examination rooms to our left and a larger one that smelled like it had just been chemically cleaned. There was a flatbed, silver trays, a Bright-light over the bed and steel cupboards. Sal asked me to describe what I saw in the drawers. When I did, she said we should take it all.

I stacked everything I could on the bed and wheeled it out into the hall, hoping I didn't miss anything.

Still not having found the supply room, we headed back in the direction of *MedBay*.

"This one." I led us to the door directly to the left of the one Wade was in.

"How do you know?" she asked me as she swiped the key.

"It's pungent."

Sal felt her way through the door not even waiting for me to aid her. She paused a moment and then began feeling her way around the aisles of shelves not even asking for my help, at least with the contents of the shelves. All she asked of me was to find her a trolley or cart of some kind. There was a large one by the door so I pushed it towards her. I gave her my best estimate on the length of the aisles as well as the distance between each one so she would be able to navigate the room. Without much effort, she did just that. Sal walked down one aisle, hand hovering in the air before the shelves and stopping whenever she located something that she wanted.

There were jars of dried herbs and seeds in neat rows. One entire aisle was just plants growing in small pots, some larger. Satchels, powders in jars, vials of every size full of liquid. Some were so large that it looked like the medics were attempting to pickle the object inside.



I left her to her work, promising to come back and help her locate any medical equipment she needed after I had searched the other rooms.

The corridor shone red from the emergency lighting, reminding me of a depiction of the Dark Sphere I'd once seen on Artist's Row. The small slit window on each door had the same red glow, except one. The double doors we had passed on our way in bore no light at all.

When I finally stood before the doors I realised why. They had no windows. But the room wasn't empty. I could hear the humming of machinery on the other side.

The stripe on the keylock was red, meaning the room was high level access only. A small sign over the door written in Kensillan read "Procurement."

I slid Ceroy's key card through the lock.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as the door slid open. The scent of people, of Blessed drenched the air. The desk ahead of me sat empty with nothing but a flickering tech board to show anyone had been there. There was a high-pitched beeping noise to my right coming from the same direction as the stench. A rotting, wounded smell coming from behind a heavily drawn curtain.

The drum of a dozen heartbeats called out to me. Some stronger than others. I pulled back the curtain and found over a dozen occupied beds.

They were all Blessed. Every single occupant. All hooked up to machines that mimicked the heartbeats I could hear. They were all unconscious. And for good reason. Parts of them were missing. A leg, an arm. Someone's hand was missing three fingers whilst another had no skin on their chest. The Brutes were stuck in transition, antlers missing, the membranous skin off a Drake's face flayed.

I swallowed the bile that rose to my throat.

In the bed in front of me, strapped down lay an Aquaticus, the scales on his legs sheared off in a long sheet that hung over a rack across his bed, the sheet still attached to his abdomen.

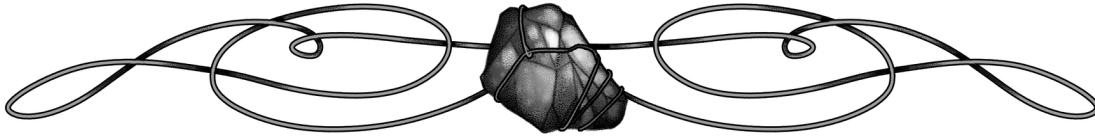
The sight just got worse the closer I got. Someone had removed his beautiful piscine eyes. My hand shaking, I reached for his. He

gave no recognition of the contact, though I suspected sakror root may have been the culprit. There were traces of it in the room.

I found his mind and spoke.

*"Hello, can you hear me?"*

A thousand voices screamed all at once, tearing into my mind, clawing at it, pulling it to pieces all saying the same thing.



## RHYDIAN

Runners continued corralling the soldiers who'd surrendered into the steel pens in the centre of the compound. The sound of tech crashing to the ground told me that Amida and the other flyers had finally taken out the last of the Sky Drones. We were lucky they hadn't seen fit to have Sky Hawks guard this place or we would have lost more than three in the raid.

It had taken less than five minutes to take this place. Now the soldiers were all captured, the fence was down, their tech dead and their communication relay duped. The capital wouldn't know about what happened here for at least a day, and by the time they got here it would be cinders. All traces of us would be burned into the soil with Kindling fire. Within the next hour, all the collars tied to this place would be removed. I'd call that a successful raid.

"What are you grinning about?" Eleen asked, cutting into my thoughts. My eyes flicked down to the collar on her own throat and that happiness evaporated.

I changed the subject with a question of my own. "Have they been located yet?"

"No," she replied. "But you say they're here, so we'll find them." Eleen stared out across the dirt courtyard where the first group of Devos were led out of the Re-education Building. That was what

they had named their barbaric indoctrination program. Where they taught Devos they were mistakes. That their lives had only been spared because rather than kill them, The Core saw fit to provide them with a purpose. From what we understood, part of that was convincing them they couldn't even keep their own names.

The Runners were moving them to the mess where blankets and food were being commandeered for them. I was about to join them when I heard her voice.

***"Rhydian!"***

I searched the courtyard for her face but realised that was pointless since she would be wearing another.

When I called out to her there was no answer. There had been no messages from her group either.

"Where's the medical facility?" I asked Eleen, but as the words left my lips, I sensed Wade. He emerged from around one of the buildings, the face he wore distraught. When he saw me it was her name he signed.

I ran.

Wade led me through the open doors of a white building, through an equally white corridor and into a room where the keypad had been smashed to keep the doors open. The stench of blood was so prominent I expected to find another bloodbath beyond.

Instead, curled up behind a desk I saw a young woman, hands clawing at the white hair on her head, mumbling incoherently.

Knowing who was behind that unfamiliar face, I crouched down and softly said her name. There was no response.

I repeated it. Finally, the young woman looked up, and her grey eyes stared back at me, red-rimmed and desperate. Her breathing suddenly picked up, quick short breaths, her gaze darting across my face in a frantic manner. "Rhydian," the stranger pleaded with Rieka's voice.

She was beginning to hyperventilate. "I can't...I can't' shut them out. You need to...to...to...I can't do it. Help me." She reached for me, grabbing my clothes, my arms, my hands. She wrapped her arms around my neck, her words becoming hysterical as her hold on

me became desperate. As though she just could not hold on tight enough. "Please. I can't push them out, you have to do something."

***"Knock me out, please!"*** her inner voice cried in anguish.

I raised my hand to her back as she continued her frantic pleas and made physical contact with the skin of her neck. The effect was immediate. Her blood pressure dropped and she fell against my chest unconscious.

I lifted Rieka into my arms and turned to face the room and the cause of her frantic state.

What I saw made my blood boil.

"Where are the medics?"



I hated forcing my taint on others, but this Medic Ceroy had given me no other option. From the corner of the interrogation room—because of course these bastards needed one—Filora used her taint to keep the Organic in her chair. She was the strongest Pneumatic amongst the Runners, stronger even than Wade and given the state we had found those Devos in, I was not taking any chances.

Sal had already removed the medic's ability to see so even if on the slightest chance the woman escaped, not even The Core would be able to identify us from her memories.

Ceroy scowled at the sound of my boots when I entered the room. The shackles on her wrist gave off a low humming sound, one of a dozen we'd been forced to use on the Devos too dangerous to walk freely. If she cooperated like they were, once they re-acclimated in a safe place, the shackles would be removed. But as of yet, she hadn't.

She just regurgitated the Propaganda Slogans. "The Core know all. The Core see all. Their punishment is swift."

Lera found the staff files an hour after the raid in one of the offices. According to Ceroy's file, she had been a medic for Kensilla for fourteen years. She was sixteen when they found her, and as much as some of the others held out hope, she was a hopeless case. Nothing we could have said or done would make this woman tell us anything about the people she was brainwashed into thinking had saved her life and given it purpose.

I opened my senses and located Ceroy's heart. Her pulse was fast, which was to be expected. I waited three beats for our hearts to sync.

Filora, my mother's best friend for more than twenty years, was aware of my taint, and so she remained in the room. It was our system, one she and my mother had set up to ensure my family's Hemopathic status remained hidden. Even from my friends. She was the muscle, and my being 'human' allowed me the façade of something familiar to these radicals.

I told Filora to release the medic. The moment the sensation dissipated Ceroy tried to strike, only for her to freeze in that position, arm outstretched reaching for me. There were no eyes in the room, so no one was aware that it was my taint in control of the situation.

I ducked under her arm as I circled her chair. I could sense her and the half-dozen others down the hall, waiting for the results of the interrogation they believed Filora was aiding me in conducting.

They could hear nothing behind that door thanks to Filora.

Ceroy returned to her seat at my behest. Even without eyes, the furrowed brow was prominent. I made her lower her hands into her lap, palms flat on her knees.

Her heartbeat quickened when she realised she was no longer in control of her own body.

"What's happening to me? Who's there?"

"You should know that I do this with a heavy heart, and I hope that in time, though I don't expect it to be anytime soon, you will come to understand that what I do now to you, I do to save many lives, including your own." I removed the pin from my hair. As I do I find that place in her mind, the place that makes it so she won't

remember this, and I pressed. The anxious expression on her face disappeared. She was blank. A puppet for my thoughts.

She overturned her hands according to my wishes and I circled the table. The Alchemist steel pin pierces the skin of her finger, a crimson drop emerging on the surface. There is no reaction from her in this state. Just the blood on the tip, whispering to me everything I needed to know about this woman.

I took a deep breath and slid the blade across my tongue.

Image after image flashed before my eyes. Her life before them, her life with them. The way they tortured her into submission and how she developed a reliance on them. I saw her encounters with military generals, an encounter with a woman who she witnessed force herself on young Devos, the same woman returning with scars across her face and being forced to mend those scars into some kind of token battle wound. I was getting lost. I tried to focus more. On the compound. On the facility itself.

New threads appeared and I let my subconscious get pulled along them. They started out slow. Her arrival at the compound, her patients, first soldiers then Devos. There was another thread there. I pulled. And I kept pulling.

Buildings, and cages. Blood and tonics. And the purpose of the patients in that room. And the other rooms. And—

I removed myself from her memories.

Through gritted teeth, I thanked her and then sent her into unconsciousness.

Outside the room, all eyes looked to me. I tried to remain calm. I knew they wanted answers, but if I had not processed what I saw yet what good did they think that information was to them.

“I need to check on my wife,” was the only thing I could say.



Rieka lay curled up exactly where I'd left her two hours ago. Lying in an empty bed. Only now she was awake and staring at the miserable soul in the bed next to her.

When I'd been forced to bring her along it had been with the knowledge that she could handle herself, but this—

*Tortured and mutilated Devos.*

We'd found tortured ones before, Devos who refused to submit, kept in windowless cells, forced to eat, sleep, and shit in the same two-meter squared cells. We'd never expected to find our kind being used as lab rats. However, it should not have surprised me since the nation in question considered us nothing more than prey animals they hunted for sport. I'd warned Rieka to expect some gruesome sights but even I hadn't expected this.

There came a crash at the far end of the room, causing Rieka to startle. I crossed the distance where Wade was attempting to lull Sal's fury with loving words.

"They are monsters!" she shouted, a sound I'd heard less than three times in my twenty-four years of life.

She turned when she heard me approach. "Rhydian, did Ceroy tell you anything?"

Wade saw the expression on my face, and knew what I was going to say, his eyes closing in defeat. "It was as we'd feared."

*Worse.*

There were dozens of camps like this across the Republic. I kept that thought to myself.

Tears began to stream down her heartbroken face. "Can you mend them?" I asked her. After wiping a sleeve across her face Sal replied, voice on the verge of wrath. "I've healed what I could already. The newest ones." She indicated to the two empty beds behind her where Eleen sat, the fury of a sea god etched into the lines of her face.

"But the others—Rhydian they're missing entire pieces of their brains and their organs. Whole limbs have been removed. It would take me days to tend to each one, but I'll do it Rhydian. If you ask me too."

*Days.*



We didn't have days. Even if we postponed burning this place to the ground, the Army was sure to pass through here within the week, and it would take Sal so much longer to mend this many patients by herself.

"We move them," I said. It was the only choice. "Put them on the trucks. Sal, go with them to the border. I'll give you the time you need to mend them. And as soon as we get back, I'll send Lily to you. We're not leaving anyone behind."

"Kill me."

Eleen shot up from the bed at those words.

Rieka was finally standing, the beauty of her hair somehow blanched of all colour here. "Kill me," she repeated. "That's what they were screaming. Please kill me." A look then crossed her face, as if she had decided something. Leaning down, she pulled her dagger from her boot and strode over to the nearest bed.

"Rieka no." I rushed to meet her, stretching across the bed to grasp her wrist.

Her gaze remained on the unconscious devo in the bed as she spoke through gritted teeth. "They have been violated and abused, Rhydian. They don't want to live anymore."

"And that gives you the right to kill them?"

Anger flashed across her features. I felt the tension in her muscles dissipate. I took that as a sign and released her. She lowered the blade and immediately strode to another bed. Her tone was brittle as glass. "She has had the same part of her brain removed fifty-seven times, each time they grow it back slowly, and without pain killers because they believe the chemical her brain produces gives her the ability to control the ocean tide." Eleen took a step from her bed towards us, towards a version of what could have been her so many times.

Rieka strode to another bed. "She has had her entire chest cavity removed eighty-three times because they required the pyrophoric sacks in her lungs to be intact."

She moved to a young man with his left leg missing. "They take his leg bones because he's like Amida. Their bones are hollow. They

grind them into power and turn it into pills that they give their soldiers to make them lighter and faster in combat.”

Slowly she turned to the flayed aquaticus in the bed beside his. “They skin his kind for their scales. This is his one-hundredth pelt. His eyes, he’s lost count since they are faster to mend. They use those in their military cocktails to aid their sailors at sea.”

My jaw clenched. I needed to hear it for myself.

“Everyone out but Rieka.”

All three obeyed, though with a good degree of hesitation. Because of Rieka, I was not behaving like myself. When the door closed behind them, I opened my senses and when I found the young Aquaticus, I felt his heart sync to my own.

Rieka’s eyes widened when she realised what I was doing but it was too late. I let him in and nearly collapsed from the agony. I gripped the bed to steady myself as the man became conscious, the pain now shared between us.

“Please,” he cried, tears falling from eyeless tear ducts. He searched the bed for my hand and I gave it to him.

“What is your name?”

Through quivering lips, he replied, “Arem.”

“Arem, my wife here tells me you wish to depart this sphere for the next?”

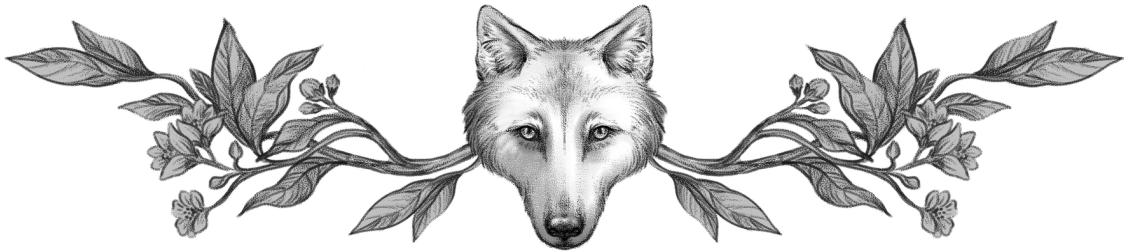
The Aquaticus hissed through his pain. “My Rila is already with Veliah. I’ve left her walking the Long River too long.”

I squeezed his hand, the pain in my leg so agonising that the edges of my vision began to blur. “And if I could help you reach her?”

“I would seek an audience with Veliah herself to carve your name in the wall of the Faithful.” He whimpered before continuing. “Mercy is not a sin.”

I clasped the young man’s hand between both of my own. I wouldn’t let him die alone. “You will go back to sleep now Arem, and before you know it your Rila will be beside you.” A soft teary smile pushed through the pained grimace where it remained as I cut myself off from the young man. I swallowed the cry of relief I wanted to scream. There would be time for that later.

I followed the flow of blood with my senses, the way the heart pulled on it like a magnet. And I stopped it. His body didn't convulse, it didn't shake. His hand simply went limp in mine. The moment I sensed his last heartbeat, the machine went silent.



## RIEKA

Mercy felt like a foreign concept when it came to Bloodhounds. But what Rhydian was doing, there could be no other way to explain it.

The way he spoke to them, his voice soft and gentle, the manner in which he soothed them, held their hands and cradled their heads. This was beyond mercy.

Not a single Blessed refused his offer.

The moment the last one had left this sphere for the Dark, I saw him waver. The elbow that rested on the rail of the bed slipped and he lost balance.

He played it off as if he hadn't just ended the lives of over a dozen people.

Fleeting was the glance I received as he turned to leave. He'd crossed the now silent room, and paused at the desk, his fingers perched on the edge as if they alone were keeping him upright. The scent that I had come to associate with him had faded, replaced by something reminiscent of warm butter, a tinge of exhaustion in the air.

He called out to Wade.

The disguised Runner still looking so unlike himself in that military uniform entered the room, Sal at his side. The gasp she expressed

as she entered was nothing short of relief.

"The bodies?" Wade questioned

"Same way we treat any Runner whose body we were lucky to find." Without another word, Rhydian straightened and walked out the open door.

Why I followed only the gods might know, but no sooner had his feet passed through the door did mine press forward. In silence they carried me down the corridor, his pulse pounding in my ears, a trail for me to follow as he slowly made his way down to the end where he disappeared around a corner.

I found him standing in the middle of another corridor. Just as empty as the last.

*"Why didn't you let me do it?"* I found myself asking.

**"Better me than you."** He wasn't lying. At least—he believed in what he said.

*"Why Rhydian?"* I needed him to tell me. I needed to know why he didn't just let me do it when I already had so much blood on my hands.

**"Blood is my blessing. Remember."** He suddenly staggered, his arms bracing the impact as he collided with the wall.

I rushed forward, my feet once again having a mind of their own and attempted to bear his weight as his legs collapsed out from under him. We both slid down the wall where Rhydian slumped against me.

"What's wrong with you?" My voice was more alarmed than I expected as I tried to ease him into a sitting position.

Through ragged breaths he replied. "It's the cost of my mercy."

"Are—" my voice caught in my throat and I swallowed. "Are you dying?" My mind raced at the thought, and not in ways I'd imagined.

He rolled onto his back beside me, using the wall as support. Rhydian smiled and chuckled into his words. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? Without me, who'd ever find out your secret."

I abruptly removed my hands. For some unfathomable reason, his words felt like whips.

"Why did you follow me Rieka?" Rhydian asked, his words much slower, his voice breathy. I met his gaze, a turbulent ocean I wanted

to drown in, a blue so bottomless, so deep there was no end. I wanted to throw anchor, tethering myself right there and hope no one ever found me.

*Why had I followed him?*

I quickly looked away and stood and felt his eyes on me even then, as though that anchor had somehow attached to me instead. "I thought you could use *my* mercy right now. I was mistaken."

My feet didn't object that time. I left him sitting there without speaking another word, turning the corner for the other corridor. Why I kept my senses on him as I left that monstrous building was just another thing I couldn't understand, and would probably require an entire day of baking to process. Which I wasn't likely to get. Yet as I arrived out in the fresh morning air, the sun just cresting the tree line, I heard him.

I heard Rhydian break down crying.

Part of me wanted to turn around. To go back around that corner and take him in my arms and comfort him. To let him, at least in that moment, not feel alone. I knew what it felt like to take a life, to have their blood on your hands. I knew the cost it took, the claim on your spirit. What I would have given to have just one person hold me after it had happened?

My feet made the smallest of moves to turn, that anchor pulling so hard my chest felt like it could cave in at any moment.

The tether snapped when I realised where I was.

The main courtyard of the compound had been a dank and depressing space to cross through. Mud from a recent rain had turned the dirt a dark brown, the footprints of all those soldiers scarring the soil as they carved paths to avoid the pens they'd imprisoned Blessed in. As though the idea of being close to my kind was a health risk.

Catching myself avoiding those same scars, I watched in dismay as a group of Runners pulled a soldier from one of those pens, placed a collar on their neck and then moved them to another pen.

*They were letting the soldiers live?*

Eleen's scent drew me over to the edge of another building where she still wore the face of a woman nearly twice her age. Mal and

Jordry stood with her, both still wearing strangers faces. Curiosity and fury raged inside. I marched over there and demanded to know what the soldiers were doing alive, the wolf in me seeing red.

"Why wouldn't they be?" Eleen replied sarcastically, which simply fuelled my anger.

"You're just collaring them, how is that punishment for the atrocities they've committed." I knew I was out of line, but the words just came out.

"Number One Rule of the Resistance, White Wolf. Kill only in self-defence or the defence of another."

I scoffed at Jordry's response. "And whose idea was that?"

Calmly, as though my condescending tone had not hit the same nerve I saw reflected in Eleen's face, he replied with, "Your husband."

Mal, ever the stoic voice of reason amongst the Runners must have scented the tension in the air and attempted to rationalise their words. "They may not be innocent of the acts that have been committed, but the soldiers are no less as indoctrinated as a Thrall. Collaring them simply inhibits them from leaving this place. We'll leave them enough food and water for them until their generals find them."

I glanced over to the pens. The soldiers looked so meek in comparison to the larger more robust Blessed who escorted them from pen to pen. How had an entire nation become so twisted, so deformed as to enslave another sentient species? Blessed loved, they laughed, they cried, they grieved. We cared and lived no differently to them, how had they grown to see us in such a vile way? I knew it would take days for my mind to suppress the expressions of the soldiers' faces every time they came close to one of the Runners. Such hate.

Eleen's scent suddenly changed as she spotted two figures over my shoulder. Two collarless Thralls in grey smocks were approaching the group, and as they came closer the overwhelming sense of familiarity fell over me.

I knew both men. By sight and by scent. The short one. He was a Smith, and the tall one with the dark birthmark over his eyebrow, he

was a Kindling. I recognised them from the night I was captured in the slave camp.

They were the Blessed Rhydian had sold to the slavers.

"Is that all the Thralls located and accounted for?" Eleen asked the tallest, the Kindling.

"Yes," he responded in a deep baritone. "All the sickly ones are being mended by the Medic." He indicated over his shoulder in the gestures only a native of the train would know. I glanced to where he'd signalled.

Kodee, the young Organic from earlier was tending to a group of Blessed in drab clothes in a small stone building, the large doors wide open. It must be serving as a medical tent since the actual facility was now no better than a morgue.

They continued talking amongst themselves going over details that didn't concern me. I just continued to stare at them, wondering about everything that had gone on since that horrible night in the slave camp. What I had seen, or rather what I thought I had seen and who I had seen doing it?

The words just escaped me.

"He sold you to the slavers. I saw you unconscious that night."

The two men looked at me like I'd grown a second head. They regarded Eleen and Mal, scents cautious, expressions of confusion. Jordry spoke up, his choice of words careful due to those in earshot. "She is Red's other half."

Their brows rose. "When did that happen?" the Smith replied giving me the once over.

"Were we gone that long?" the Kindling asked Eleen. The comment got a smile from her. An actual genuine smile.

"Long enough," Mal interjected.

They were Runners—it made sense. Rhydian was a Hemopath. Rhydian had used them to find the compound. All he needed was one drop of their blood, if the rumours were to be believed. They would simply have to be placed in one of the slave camps and he could track them anywhere. Though they likely weren't aware of this little fact about their leader.



I studied their faces, wanting to find anger there for the position they had been placed in, but I knew I wouldn't. Runners' missions were always voluntary.

*How could I have been so wrong? How had I misjudged so much so quickly?*

Those thoughts permeated every part of my mind on the drive back to the tracks. The Runners had commandeered three vehicles—it was all that could be spared since the rest were being used to transport the freed slaves to some unknown safe haven I wasn't privy to the location of. So the quarters were quite cramped.

Forced to sit astride Rhydian, in a position so uncomfortable as to avoid making excessive contact with him, that the moment we drove over a bump in the road my body slid further into his. I resolved myself to stay there.

I blamed my exhaustion.

The unfortunate thing about this particular position was the fact I had to sit facing him on account of the giant electronic detection device mounted to the passenger dash. My legs and his would not have fit if I'd been facing the other way. So not only did I have to face this man who'd spurned my genuine desire to support him a few hours ago, but I was also unable to stop the thoughts of the actions this particular position could entail.

I braced one hand against the door frame but was unable to support myself any other way than with the other hand on his chest. A chest which rose and fell quite heavily under my touch.

We went over another bump and I fell into his chest, both hands now bracing his body for support. As I rose off him wanting to apologise, the part of me that still had my mother's voice in my head urging me to do so, I hesitated.

Rhydian was staring at me. Intensely. Desirously. His heated gaze dropped to my lips and remained there. I caught the motion of his throat as he swallowed and something low in my stomach itched and crooned at the action.

His hands which had been motionless on his legs a moment ago, trailed identical paths up my thighs and slowly settled on my lower back. Whilst one hand braced me, the thumb of his other hand

stroked the base of my spine. His eyes dropped to my lips where I had begun to bit my lower lip.

In an instant, his lips were on mine. Long and slow, he drew the kiss out as though it were a test of some kind, an experiment from one who had never kissed in his life. A fact about Rhydian I knew not to be true. Comparatively, I would say this was our first real kiss.

But that thought was as dangerous as the game I was playing with him. I had known it was going to be difficult, winning over this man, convincing him my life was worth preserving, worth saving over the thing he was willing to sell me for. But surely I had not succeeded already?

I let the feeling in my gut enjoy its win, even if it was fleeting. I relished in the softness of his lips as the bristle of his regrowing beard tickled my skin. A sensation I would never admit aloud again that I thoroughly enjoyed on a man. And even after his lips had departed mine, I found myself lingering in that contact with him, our heads resting against one another for support, as though the kiss had utterly exhausted us. Rhydian's pine and earth scent enveloped me until nothing else existed in that space but him. But us.

*How had I waited so long to share scents with another, was it always like this?*

I could sense even the most incremental of changes to his scent, one moment fear the next utter elation. Proximity to another being had never felt so intoxicating, so—terrifying.

"Are you two going to make a habit out of this?" a voice said, cutting through my reverie. I finally opened my eyes to find Rhydian already staring at me in utter awe.

A crunching noise finally pulled us apart and drew our attention to Amida who'd wedged herself through the middle of the seats. She placed a nut in her mouth from the pile in her hand. "I mean I don't mind watching, but others might find your affection for one another obnoxious."

I looked over at Eleen, her gaze focused on driving. "I couldn't give a shit," she defended herself without looking at me.

When I finally looked back, Rhydian was still staring at me.

"What was that for?" my inner voice asked, trying not to think about the expression his eyes still held.

**"An apology."**

*"You apologise in kisses?"*

The smallest of smirks quirked up the corner of his mouth, enough to allow that godly gift of a dimple to peak through his stubble.

*"And what damage do you have to do to warrant a different kind of apology?"* I asked, sliding my hands lower down his chest, my thighs clenching against the fabrics of his pants, which was more than enough for him to gather my meaning.

His scent changed dramatically, and it was intoxicating. Enough that it was my turn to lean in.

*"I'm sorry about earlier."*

I stopped instantly.

*This man must have the control of a god.*

I pulled back attempting to return to my original position, but his hands held me in place. Distance had not been his intention. And since his hands were warmer than the night air that was invading the space from the windows Eelen insisted on keeping open, I let him.

"Go on," I said, keeping my eyes on his, not caring that the others would undoubtedly know that we were having a private conversation.

**"You were only trying to be kind and I was an asshole."**

*"A right horse penis actually."*

**"Horse penis? That's a new one."** His laugh garnered a few stares from the others. **"I just wanted to say that. And to thank you. For protecting Sal and for procuring all the medical supplies. It means a lot to me."**

*"I didn't do it for you. I did it for Lily. Even I know how dangerous pregnancy is."*

His brows furrowed as if to ask, "You?"

*"My mother. In Celestisum we are taught to believe that interfering in the reproduction cycle, even to aid a woman through the birthing process is to believe oneself a God. Cellshaping, except to make something more beautiful is forbidden in Deos. An Organics' civic*

*duty is to manage agriculture. My mother needed help because we were not the same breed so my father broke the law."*

**"And here I thought your country was the better out of the God Territories."**

*"It had its moments. I'm just glad I could help Lily."*

**"You mean that don't you."**

*"Condescension doesn't look good on you Rhydian."*

He smirked, his eyes caressing my lips. **"But you'd look good on me."**

My pussy tightened not only at his words but at the way his eyes darkened as he gazed down at me. I wasn't short by any means, but sitting on his lap, I felt meek and I didn't like it.

I slid my hand back up his chest beneath the leather of his red jacket resting it just over his heart. *"Is that an invitation?"*

**"Isn't it what you've been after this whole time, to get me in bed with you?"**

*"You have been in bed with me."*

**"Must I spell it out for you?"**

I let my inner voice croon. *"Would you?"*

A low grumble reverberated through his chest in frustration, the sensation tantalizing beneath my hand. **"I desire to sleep with you Rieka, in the most carnal fashion so that I might hear you scream my name in raw pleasure."**

*"I would absolutely love that—"*I hesitated. Intentionally.

**"You're doing this to vex me,"** he drawled out. I returned a smile of my own, one where I took my bottom lip between my teeth as I stared at his lips. *"I have one condition."*

He breathed a sigh. **"Of course you do."**

*"You started this. Now would you like me to scream your name in pleasure or not?"*

**"Do go on."** His grip on my back tightened pleurably.

*"Only when I want."*

He bristled, his eyes widening. In the back of the truck, a female voice mumbled in amusement. "Someone hit a nerve." Perhaps I had.

***"Let me get this straight. You are withholding sex from someone you're not actually having sex with?"***

"Was that not clear?" Sarcasm laced my words, a mask of innocence plastered to my face. If he wanted me, it would be on my terms not his. I cocked my head slightly and ran my lower lip through my teeth.

***"Then I want something in return?"***

"Sex. You're getting sex in return," I said, utterly bewildered by his request.

***"No. If you are withholding, I'd like to make you regret it."***

It was not a threat. It was far, far from it. And judging by his dramatically changing scent, if I did not agree to something soon, he was likely to strip me naked right here in the truck.

I ran a finger gently along the line of his jaw. *"I'm listening."*

***"I want to taste you."*** When my eyes fell to his lips he shook his head with a small smirk.

***"I want to fuck you with a kiss. To feel you move and tighten around my tongue. I want to tease you, to strip every morsel of that wolf-sharpened armour from you, until you come undone in a raptured breathless mess. I want to have you, whenever, wherever I want."***

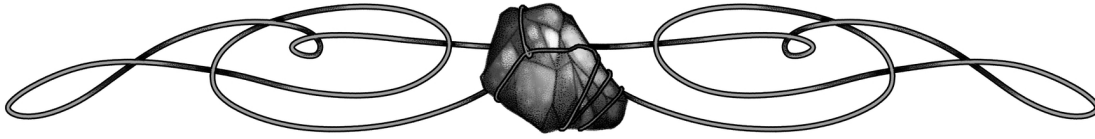
Who was I to turn down a man willing to shove his head between my legs. *"I can live with that."*

Eleen forced the truck to an abrupt stop. She slammed her foot on the break so hard, if it wasn't for my quick reflexes, my head would have smashed into the windshield.

Rhydian had only just opened his mouth, likely to ask why she'd stopped when we both realised that the truck ahead of us had stopped as well.

Anika who had been scouting overhead, landed by the side of the truck where she ran to the window seeking out Rhydian.

"A patrol up ahead. They are heading straight for us."



## RHYDIAN

***F**uck!*

I should have expected something to go wrong. We'd had too much luck, and that god just had it in for us.

"Rhydian?"

Jordry pulled my focus. "What do you want us to do?"

I looked between the Alchemist's face and his wife's. Amida eyes were wide, her heart beating erratically. But her expression was torn. She wanted a fight, but she knew we weren't in a situation where we could win.

Eleen stared at me from the driver's seat. Her brown eyes focused, waiting. She knew we only had one chance to survive this encounter. It was her plan after all.

"Prism Shield?" she asked.

Rieka's gaze was heavy on me as I stared at my oldest friend. As I contemplated such a ridiculous plan to get us home all in one piece.

I sighed in frustration. "Shit. Yes, Prism Shield." I turned to Anika. "Spread the word." Wind gust through the open window as the Echo shot off into the air.

***"Rhydian, what's going on? "***

Rieka's tapped my chest reminding me that she was still in my arms. That the world hadn't stopped just because I wanted it to. My

hands ran up the curves of her body, as her gaze darted all over my face, as if she were trying to determine my thoughts through it.

She hadn't known about this part of the plan. It hadn't been part of the plan. It was always just there. A contingency in case—in case the bastards decided to change patrol paths and fucking cut us off.

My hands tightened around her waist. "I don't have time to explain. Just stay with Eelen." I popped the door and slid her off me. I made it halfway out the truck door before my sleeve snagged. Rieka had it fisted in her hand, her knuckles turning white.

"Where in the Sphere are you going?" she demanded to know.

"Rieka!" I don't mean for her name to sound like an apology. "I have to go. I need you to stay with Eelen and speak for me ok? Don't leave the truck."

She slid right up to the door before I shut it on her, her expression one of confusion.

I took one last look at Rieka through the truck window before turning for the forest. Behind me, I knew the Runners were already moving into place. Wade and the other Pneumatics would be taking up positions in front of their vehicles, the Brights circling the convoy. Pressure began to build and my ears suddenly popped. The sound barrier shielding the vehicles had been built.

The muscles in my body screamed for me to stop, as though they had run fifty miles, even though I hadn't gone more than fifty feet. Not even collapsing into the brush could ease the ache. My hand as it parted the brush quivered from exhaustion. A sign my body was not prepared for a long fight. I shuffled along the edge of the ground, twisting in the brush to get a better view. The last of the Bright's luminos emerged from her hand in a striking stripe of white. Then one by one, in a cascading effect, the Brights vanished, and with them the convoy.

*"Rieka, can you hear me?"*

There was nothing but forest where she had been. Dark ominous fixtures that seemed to claw at the moonlight.

***"Of course I can hear you. I can see you too. What are you doing out there?"***

Relief flooded me at the sound of her voice. *"Tell Jordry and Eleen it worked. The shield is up."*

**"What shield, Rhydian what are you doing?"** Her tone was more frustrated than confused.

*"Rieka tell them!"*

**"I did all right, now tell me what is going on."** Rieka's voice quivered, as if...I pushed the thought aside. It was frustration that had her questioning me. Under normal circumstances, I would find her stubbornness amusing, but right now—she was a pain in the ass. *"A Kensillan Militar Patrol is coming. We're too slow to run, and we can't risk the supplies. The Brights have shielded the convoy. I can't see you."*

**"The convoy's invisible?"** Her voice sounded awestruck. I almost wished I could see her face, imprint it upon my memory. **"I didn't even know that sort of thing was possible."**

*"Just stay quiet. The more noise you make, the harder the Pneumatics have to work. And this must work Rieka. Or we're all dead."*

**"Why didn't you tell me this part of the plan?"**

*"It wasn't part of the plan until just now. There is not meant to be a patrol here."*

We were so close to the coast. It could not have been Army. The Admirals ran this part of the country. Though they were usually too busy keeping pirates out of the Mesali Gulf and away from the capital to bother with inland patrols.

Rieka scoffed in response. **"So now we wait?"**

The sound of churning gravel sounded to the right as if in response. Wheels, dozens driving over the road.

The bloodwork back at the compound took almost everything out of me. It would be hours before I could wield at full strength again, so whilst I knew exactly how many soldiers were moving towards the convoy. I'd never be able to hold them off. I would be lucky to puppet one in my current state.

Three trucks and a tank. For every one of us, there were five of them. Dark blue uniforms marked them as Navy. The slim cut of the fabric and the sheen of the material indicated they were armoured,



their bodies protected by Spindled garments. Whitecaps. From the Aredyn Garrison. The patrol must have been heading for the compound to collect more Currents for their serf ranks.

The patrol vehicles encroached further on our position, the distance between us shrinking exponentially.

*I should have made them move off the road.*

It wasn't going to work. The convoy took up too much space. The trucks were too big.

*I should have made them procure smaller vehicles.*

The soldier walking ahead of the patrol suddenly stopped, his grip on his gun shifting.

***"Rhydian, I think he's seen us."*** Her voice grew flat, quiet.

My senses honed in on the soldier, to his heart. It beat steadily. His adrenaline would be spiking if he had seen anything. The prism shield had likely drawn his eye. A change in the light. I relay that to Rieka, but even I'm not convinced.

The soldier continued at a slow pace, meandering on the road as the patrol vehicles behind him continued to catch up.

***"Rhydian!"***

*"I know."* The soldier was walking a direct path down the road. They were going to run right into the convoy, pass right through the shield, and everything would have been for nothing.

I pulled my pin from my hair having made my decision. My voice remained firm when I called out to Rieka. *"Tell Jordry to get the convoy to the tracks, get everyone back on the train. I'll get there as soon as I can."*

***"What are you going to do?"***

I don't answer her. Which only irritated her more. She called my name several times as I buried myself further in the brush.

My breathing came out ragged. I'd only have enough energy to do this once, and I'd likely only be able to maintain it for a few minutes so I would have to make it count.

Blood pooled in my palm where I had pierced the skin with the end of the blade. The familiar tingling that accompanied this type of bloodwork trailed down my neck and along my arm until it reached my palm. Like the molten metal in a forge, my blood crawled from

my hand in a single long ribbon, elongating and hardening into the crystalline form of a Crimson Blade. Against steel, it would fail, and I didn't have enough energy to maintain its form. But against flesh and bone, nothing could compare. I just had to get close enough.

My fist closed around the crystalline handle, the blade humming under my grasp as the soldier moved into range. I struck hard and fast, feeling the blade slice through his armour as if it were parchment. Through the blade, I could taste his blood. When I sliced into the flesh of his chest and raked it down to the bone, pink mist showered the air.

I'd garnered their attention. Orders were shouted, doors opened and closed as soldiers poured out of the vehicles. But I was already running. It did not matter where I ran too, just that it was away from the convoy. Bullets ricocheted off the trees around me as the soldiers tried and failed to hit their target.

My senses told me the Runners in the convoy, Jordry, Amida, Wade and the others were moving again, which meant the patrol was now focused on me.

I skidded to a halt at an embankment, the drop much more than I knew my body could handle at present. Heavy footfalls pounded on the ground behind me, and I spun around to face the soldiers who had pursued.

There were seven. *I can handle seven.*

They hadn't even slowed down. The smallest of the soldiers, the fastest rushed me. My blade sliced him clean in half, the edge cutting straight through his spinal cord between two vertebrae.

The next soldier slid to a halt at the sight of his comrade, fury lining the features of his young face.

It was an odd sort of hatred they bore us.

On the one hand, we were their greatest commodity, and on the other, that reliance on us had forged a kind of self-hatred that had no outlet except through their treatment of us. Convincing themselves we were the enemy seemed to be the only way they could live with themselves. Believing us capable of anything other than taking orders and being obedient meant we were more than

the animals they preached we were. And their minds could not live with that possibility.

The soldier pulled a sword from his back, the steel glinting in the moonlight. I could feel my body weakening with every moment I held the crimson blade. Time was running out. The soldier moved to strike, his blade aimed at my shoulder.

Blood rushed to my head, causing the world to slow just enough that I could see the motion of the sword. I moved out of its line of strike. Shock and anger emerged on the soldier's face, his gaze fixed on me as I spun and swung back. My blade went right through the gap between his body armour.

Fixing the oncoming soldiers with a glare, I ripped the sword from his body. And after it fell to the ground, I unceremoniously kicked him off the edge of the embankment.

His body hit the ground on the bottom at the same moment the other soldiers stopped. Two kept their guns raised as I twirled the blade in the air like a Setrali sword dancer. Each one wore the exact same expression. Hatred.

"Surrender to The Core and you will be spared," one of them said in Kensillan. Not feeling particularly inclined to show my understanding, I feigned ignorance.

"It's a rogue. Let's just kill it," another said, his trigger finger itching to pull.

"No," ordered the third. The insignia on his uniform declared him a lieutenant. He glanced at my hand as he spoke his next words. "It wields a blood sword. The captain has always wanted a Hemopath in his retinue."

They all exchanged glances. The trigger-happy one cocked a brow. "Does it need to be intact, sir?"

*I would most definitely prefer to be intact!*

My knees began to buckle, the crystal beneath my hand starting to soften.

The lieutenant shrugged. "*It can be mended.*"

*Fuck it!*

I released my will over my blade and it fell like a ribbon from my hand, the crimson pooling on the forest floor as I forced the wound

to clot. "I have a better option. You just take me in."

"The Quarry speaks." The lieutenant surveyed me through dark eyes as he wandered towards me. Entirely unafraid. It was a rare trait in a human. And not a good one.

I mimicked his tone. "Because I am intelligent."

The lieutenant raised a thick brow. "And yet he slaughters The Core's venerable soldiers. That does not scream intelligence to me."

"And yet despite all Kensilla's propaganda, here we are having a civilised conversation. So much for Quarry being too stupid to know their own name."

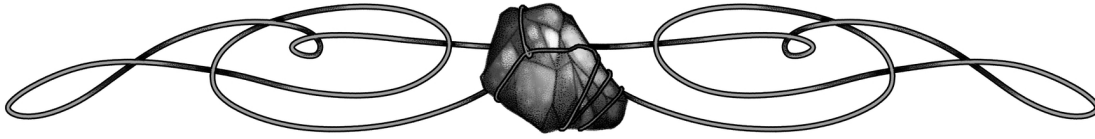
The lieutenant continued his slow pace towards me. "And does the Quarry *have* a name?"

"Lieutenant first," I said with a mocking bow.

The lieutenant smiled, the expression not quite reaching his eyes. I expected the hit. Whitecaps didn't take too kindly to cocky taint wielders. But nothing quite prepared you to have the air forced out of your lungs when a rather large fist collided with your stomach.

The forest floor rose to meet me, my knees slamming hard into the soil. I saw his black leather polished boots a moment before my head was yanked back by my hair. Leaning down, the lieutenant glared at me with an icy gaze. "Quarry speak only when spoken to. Best learn that." Upon releasing me, my body still struggling to take in air after his punch, he kicked me.

The last thing I saw when I hit the bottom of the embankment before my body finally succumbed to exhaustion, was a flash of white between the trees.



## RHYDIAN

Nimble fingers moved their way up my aching muscles, the sensation cool as the Organic mended the parts of my body my taint hadn't yet tended to, the crackling hearth behind me reflected in the metal of the collar around his neck.

A teapot hissed on a stove to the right, a high-pitched whistle calling to the occupant of the tent. The Organic shifted as the tapping of hard-bottomed boots sounded on the stone floor, their heart rate spiking.

The fact my senses were still heightened meant there were no traps in the room. The chaffing of the shackles on my wrists however was enough to know my taint was limited. I could exhibit control over my own body, just not anyone else's.

The occupant of the tent crossed over to the stove, retrieving the teapot. Hot steam filled the air as he poured the boiling water into the two cups that sat on the bench.

With his head hung low, the Organic rose, my body finally rid of the exhaustion I'd incurred upon it, and he turned towards the occupant. "It is done, sir. Is there anything else you require of me?"

"You may leave Medic." The occupant's voice was heady, a politeness in his accent that couldn't be taught. This wasn't just a Venerable Navy Captain. This was a trueborn Naven.

As the Organic left, the lieutenant, who until this point had stood guard over me whilst his captain prepared tea, stepped forward as if to speak. But he too was excused from the tent.

"Sir, I really must insist that someone be here with you. *It* is a Hemopath."

The captain turned from the stove, the teacups in his hands. "That will be all Lieutenant Rozal."

I know I must hide my amusement in the captain's presence, but the expression on the officer's young face was just too hard to resist. At his obvious dismissal, he snapped his heels together, fisted his chest in salute and turned from the tent.

Aside from the obvious propaganda elements, the overbearing golden griffin statue representing the Republic of Kensilla and a "*The Core Sees All*" poster, for a garrison tent, the room was oddly homey. A portrait of a Kensillan Vice Admiral donned one of the walls, books in rows and stacked in towers took up residence on the pristinely kept wooden furniture that filled the space. Several photographic displays depicting a raven-haired young woman made the space feel loved. Someone had even folded my jacket and placed it on a table by the tent flap. Not the kind of accommodations I expected to find myself in when I let myself get captured.

It had been intentional obviously. Since I was a military capture, any attempt to collar me would be wrought with paperwork, which needed to follow specific protocols before the nanotech of the collars would be allowed anywhere near me. A long and arduous process that would require someone to then escort me to a Re-education Compound—the nearest being the one we had just raided. Which would mean their only choice would be to take me to the Aredyn Processing Centre, and that would take a few days travel. So, all in all, I had about a week to escape.

*I have done it in less.*

Dark eyes inspected me from over the porcelain rim of the teacup. A square jaw on a face that looked younger than he was. Even at a distance, I sensed his age was close to forty, the lines of war and wear creased by his eyes. A dark blue jacket hanging on a stand by the bookshelf confirmed his rank was indeed captain. The gold pin

over the right breast signalled his Naven status, and the medals on his left spoke to his decorated rank within the Kensillan Navy. This was not a man to be trifled with.

Casually, as if we were friends, he strode over, closing the distance between us and offered me the second cup. When I didn't take it, he sipped his own and said, "It's tarima, calms the nerves."

"Do I seem nervous to you, sir?" The shackles prohibited large movement, so I was forced to take the cup with both hands. It did indeed smell like the Kensillan tealeaf he spoke of. I brought the rim to my lips waiting for his reply.

There was only one place to sit in the room. A large soft leather armchair, high backed and timber framed. An unsettling sign. Company was rare, and unwelcome. The captain took the seat, sipped the tea and replied. "You are enigmatic."

As relaxed as he sounded, the captain sat quite straight in his chair. A kind of regality to his posture. Something I had only seen on true-born Naven who had displeased the Core and wound up on the rail. They rarely lasted a week.

I sipped my own before responding, my throat burning in that satisfactory way a hot beverage ought to. The man may be Kensillan, but he made a good cup of tea. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"I wouldn't."

My cup stilled on the way to my lips, and I met his gaze over the rim.

Casually, he rested the cup on his crossed knee. "Unlike my men, I am aware of just how devious members of The Quarry can be. And as Lieutenant Rozal tells it, you appeared out of nowhere, slaughtered one of my men, and then ran off and slaughtered two more. And instead of fighting for your freedom, you turned yourself in. So, there are only two conclusions to be made. You've seen the value in serving The Republic and have chosen to fulfil the purpose The Core intended for you, or—" He paused. "You were trying to protect something."

I willed my face to remain motionless. Emotionless. I took another sip of the tea, finding the taste had become bitter. "And why would

you assume that, sir?" The title felt vile on my tongue.

He took another long drink of his tea before he answered. "Because your kind are pack animals." I might not have the senses of a Brute, but even I could feel the reek of disdain this man had for me and my kind.

His empty cup rang as it made contact with the glass-topped table in front of him.

"Have you considered that I might have sought you out to offer my services?" My comment amused him. A guttural laugh filled the tent, the sound echoing off the fabric as if it were a cave.

"Plausible. Your kind do manage to find us the best Thralls." The captain leaned forward, a puzzled expression emerging on his handsome, weathered features. "I'm curious. How does a Lycoan come to speak Kensillan?"

I forced my pulse to remain steady, picking at the dirt under my nails. "I lived in the Armistice Zone for some time."

A single dark brow rose. "You learned our language there?"

"We are an intelligent species, we pack animals."

The captain's eyes remained fixed on me as he spoke. "It would certainly seem so." His soft-spoken tone made me uneasy. Oddly enough, he reminded me of my grandfather.

"I don't come across a lot of your particular breed." He emphasised the last word, to make clear I knew what he thought of me no doubt.

"The one time I did, I discovered something quite remarkable." My gut churned with every word he spoke. "You have the uncanny ability to witness memories."

I frowned and played the ignorant fool, brushing my hair behind my ear. Some time since I'd arrived, they had removed my pin from my hair. "It's crazy what lies people will say to improve their chances at survival."

He relaxed back into his chair, that regal demeanour vanishing, replaced with something more casual. Something that held the ease of one of the train's strays, contemplating how best to play with their dinner. The weight on the shackles felt heavier quite suddenly.



Ignoring my comment, he added, "And quite miraculously allows others to witness them."

I relayed nothing. My face didn't falter, my expression didn't waver. I gave nothing away and yet—

"Walk over to me."

My body obeyed him. My body. Not me.

"Stop."

Again, my body obeyed his order. It came to an abrupt halt right in the middle of the tent, where he stared at me in wild fascination.

The teacup loomed in his hand, a fraudulent gift. The bastard had laced my tea.

We thought they were just rumours. But they'd fucking done it. The Kensillans had synthesised a control variant for Charmer toxin. Two parties ingest it but only one is able to exhibit control.

The captain must have noticed that I'd come to that conclusion because he then confirmed it as he stood and walked over to me. "The Medics have been doing wonders with Toxicant chemicals," he said retrieving my cup from my fingers, and turning it under his gaze as though he were attempting to read the leaves. "This one in particular was taken from a farm near The Black Sea. Distilled from Charmers who produce the most potent compulsions."

He carefully walked over to the table and placed my cup down before moving out of my field of vision. I attempted to will my body to move, to flee regardless of my shackles but it was of no use. I was utterly immobile.

The irony of the situation was not lost on me. *Puppet master becomes the puppet.*

Steel glinted under the Kindling lights of the tent. The captain had returned with my pin, flipping it over in his hand as he approached me. "I witnessed this only the once, so you'll have to understand if I'm a little too eager."

I opened my mouth to comment a vulgar phrase, which would have likely gotten me another punch to the stomach. But he cut me off. "Be silent. I don't need your screams agitating the Thralls outside."

He closed the space between us, his gaze examining me like prying fingers. "I understand of all Quarry, yours is the only one with self-regenerative properties." I opened my mouth again to speak.

"No no," he said without looking me in the eye, his focus on my body instead. "You're not required to respond. Just stand there and don't move."

A wave rushed over me, a tensing of muscles as my body fell in line with his orders. My jaw clamped shut.

"Raise your arms for me."

My body obeyed, allowing him to then pull the sleeves of my shirt up. Then with the precision of a Hunter, the captain sliced into the flesh of my forearm. My taint's reaction was instantaneous.

The wound stopped bleeding. My blood clotted and my skin knitted itself back together again.

The captain's eyes went wide, the corner of his mouth rising. He placed the pin dagger back on my arm, which I could not move, and he sliced through it again.

I'd seen the look he possessed before. On the faces of scientists from Prea researching rare plants and animals, or historical excavations of Pre-God-Fall sites, who had suddenly discovered something that could change their world.

For this man, that discovery was me.

"The breakthrough your body would provide to the Procurement Division would be irreplaceable," he mumbled to himself eagerly. "To the farms as well. They've never had Hemopath stock."

Standing this close, even under his control, my taint remained my own. It spoke to me of the darkness that hummed in the man's blood, remnants of a sickness long since healed. He was close enough to touch and yet my body refused my will.

He caught my gaze and glanced down at my chest. The cords of my shirt lay unfastened, but he still slid the pin dagger beneath them and pulled, using the tip to untie them further, nicking my skin with each attempt. One by one the cuts healed.

This was why he had an Organic look over me. He wanted me in peak condition for his experiment.

He sliced into me, repeatedly. Curious to see if the result was the same on every part of my body, each cut deeper than the last. My screams ground against my teeth. By the sixty-fifth cut, my throat was raw, my body quivering.

"Now let's see if this works." He sliced the dagger across my chest again, but instead of wiping it on the cloth he'd been using to clean the blade, he dug the tip in.

"What were you protecting on the road?"

The thought was involuntary. Impossible to curb when the topic was brought up. The captain quickly withdrew the dagger tip and placed it on his tongue. His eyes went wide, his pupils dilating as what I knew to be a memory flashed within his vision. The expression vanished and he looked at me with a new sense of clarity.

A maniacal expression took its place. "You stole supplies, from where?"

He dug the dagger into my arm, this time not even bothering to move my shirt. He just stabbed right through it then licked the blade clean.

His breath caught as the memory rushed behind his eyes. "You raided one of our Thrall compounds." Fury turned his eyes to hollow pits.

The flowery scent of tarima struck me as he exhaled into my face, a surreal contrast to the carefully controlled man before me. Violence screamed in his blood. "Where do you come from? Show me everything!"

*No!*

He took my hand, held it over the teacup and slit my wrist.

I'd failed them. I'd gotten myself captured and it had all been for nothing. He would learn the truth and they would kill us all.

When his sight had returned to him, my blood giving him everything he needed to destroy the resistance, the captain rushed to the tent door. "You girl, get in here. I need you to take a message for me." He turned back into the tent, his gaze fixed on the desk in the corner. Soft-soled shoes entered the tent, heavy breathing with it. The captain scrawled something on a piece of parchment as the

Thrall appeared to my left. Unable to move, all I saw was the edge of a blue smock. Eager and fast he quickly returned to the Thrall.

"Take this to the communication tent and have them get word straight away to..." He grunted.

The captain's pulse suddenly spiked.

Behind me, I heard him stumble, the sound of his boots skidding in the dirt beyond the rug on the tent floor. Another grunt, his pulse quickening followed by a heavy thud as his body hit the ground.

A moment later the Thrall in the blue smock appeared before me. With a head of white hair.

"Rhydian!" Pale blue eyes spread wide as they took in the sight of blood that stained my shirt, their search frantic as they tried to find the source. "Are you harmed, are you injured?" she asked, her hands gentle as they cradled my arms where my white sleeves had turned scarlet.

My body moved to her desire, pliable, willing. And I didn't care. She was here, alive.

*"Rieka what the fuck are you doing here?"*

**"I don't like being told what to do,"** she said, gazing down at my shackles.

*"I'm well aware of that. But why are you here and not on the train?"*

**"I'm saving your ass. Now tell me why the fuck you were letting him cut you up?"**

*"It's a kink."*

Her face contorted in annoyance at my response. **"Blood humour. Real charming. Next, you'll tell me you write poetry in your own blood."**

My expression must have shown my amusement at the comment because it earned me a growl. *"Steady. He spiked my tea!"*

**"You couldn't think of something better to do with your time than sip tea with the enemy?"** Rieka reached into the inside pocket of her smock as she spoke, retrieving what appeared to be a Bright shard.

*"Hold still."* She took the shackles in one hand and applied the tip of the shard to the lock. White sparks began to spray from the

connection as the shard forged its way through the lock, melting the steel and circuitry.

The shackles fell away. I caught them before they crashed into the floor, choosing to displace them on the armchair instead, not willing to risk being heard. As I returned to Rieka where she stood over the captain, I realised that my body was my own again. Lighter than it had been for hours. I glanced down and found the captain still held my dagger in his hand. I quickly retrieved it and secured it in my own boot sheath before I gave the sadistic son-of-a-bitch any more of my attention.

Blood seeped into a spot by his abdomen, a superficial wound but there was something else there. Tainting his blood. I was no longer under his control, but I could still sense the Charmer's toxin in my system. But there was something else there too, something that was slowing his heart rate.

*"He's still alive,"* I said to her.

***"Did you want him dead?"***

The thought had crossed my mind. It was very likely he knew everything now, about the train, the resistance, about my deal with Rieka. My only course of action was to kill him. But the death of a navy captain, especially one that occurred within his own camp would cause all sorts of complications, not to mention the shit storm that would rain down on all Devos if the Venerable Navy thought one of us had injured him.

*FUCK!*

We needed him alive.

*"What did you give him?"* I asked Rieka.

***"Thatcher's wart. But it may have been too much. Sal said it can put someone in a three-month coma. But I don't think I was supposed to use the juice of a whole flower."***

*"You poisoned him?"*

***"I honestly didn't think it was going to work. I snuck in with the army-serf uniform and had only just stolen this one when he saw me. I didn't even know you were in the tent until I smelled your blood."***

This could work. I knew what needed to be done when we got back to the train. And with the time we had left, Marian 1<sup>st</sup> was only a few months away. It would need to be done soon. And from what I knew of thatcher's wart, it wasn't an easy herb to identify, especially not for Medics who don't study archaic medicine. And if he woke up, well I could always come back and kill him. I bent down, ripped a piece off his blood stained shirt and tucked it in my pocket.

*"Do you have any of the flowers left?"*

She pulled a bundle of orange flowers from her uniform pocket to confirm, so I told her to empty the teapot and boil another to steep the flowers in it. We would make it look like he accidentally poisoned himself.

***"What about him?"*** Rieka asked, staring down at the captain like she wanted to step on his face.

*"Leave him to me."* So whilst Rieka did as I asked, I set about healing the bastard.

The sound of his blood rushing through his veins filled my head, like I was lying face down in a river. I was out of practice, not having healed anyone but myself since I was twelve. In all likelihood, if he lived, he'd probably suffer from pain for the rest of his life.

I could live with that.

It took me a moment to force the captain's body to start the healing process. When I felt his blood begin to clot around the knife wound, I forced his body's healing process into overdrive, stimulating his cells, fresh blood production and much to our benefit, a faster circulation of the poison.

By the time Rieka had poured the captain a new cup of thatcher's wart tea, the wound in his stomach had healed, and I'd thrown his shirt into the hearth to burn. We dressed him in a new one and dragged him over to his chair to take a long nap.

Hopefully, if anyone came in, they'd think him asleep, and it would buy us more time to escape.

I glanced over at Rieka and found her peering out of the flap, daylight casting her white hair gold. *"How long has it been since the*

*patrol came?"* Her face blanched at my words, her heartbeat quickening momentarily.

*I took a step towards her. "Rieka how many hours?"*

***"It took me 10 hours to track you here,"*** she replied solemnly. ***"There are only 6 hours left on the dupes. We won't make it back to the train in time."***

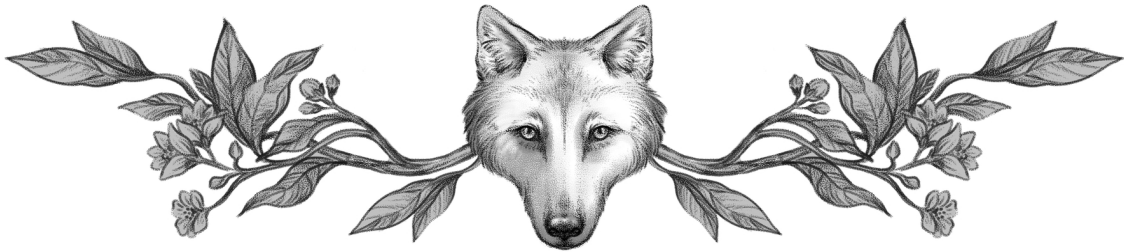
The tension in my muscles vanished with her answer. *"Oh Steady! Good, we have time."*

That was not the answer she was expecting to hear. Nor was the knowledge that the device on her neck would continue to dupe her location for another thirty hours. Incredulous was putting her mood mildly.

*"Hang on,"* I said as we prepared to leave the tent. *"You fled the convoy, not knowing if you could make it back in time to reboard the train, to come rescue me?"* Rieka glanced at me and then back out of the tent, her mouth set in a hard line.

*"Now who's falling for who?"*

A soft indignant growl rose up her throat in response.



## RIEKA

**I**t was a maze. The garrison camp had no discernible pattern to the tent arrangement. Rhydian had insisted on leading us in our escape, but after the fifth wrong turn, the last one almost leading us into the path of a group of officers, he finally gave in and let me lead.

Rhydian had said to follow the scent of water. And I had done that. Until we found ourselves at the site of a well and Rhydian in his frustration, scolded me.

*"You said water not river. They smell different."*

***"How was I supposed to know that?"***

*"You be more specific with your instructions and it won't matter!"*

He followed me through the various alleyways and buildings as I tried to decipher our path through the hate-infested, camp. He'd even willingly donned the uniform I had stolen for him, in case we had to pass through one of the courtyards under the eyes of the soldiers that guarded it.

The few times we did pass through, we kept our heads low, pretending to be Thralls. Not a single soldier bothered to look our way. Even with Rhydian pretending to be shackled with me escorting him, no soldier bothered to check on us. He kept the shackles close



to his stomach, hiding the shard blast damage I'd caused to it. Just in case.

The scent of the river led us to the back of the garrison. And in some twisted act of fate, a vehicle exchange. Dozens of trucks and tanks sat in neat rows in a warehouse. Beyond that, the sound of rushing water told me the river was just behind it. Within, I only detected three, but there must have been a Toxicant trap outside the building because I could not scent if they were human or Blessed. I wouldn't know what they were until I crossed through the trap's barrier. We would be going in blind.

***"Not ideal. But we've limited options."*** Rhydian huffed out a breath before he slid through the side door to the building.

The scents on those inside rushed towards me the moment I crossed over the threshold. Two humans and a Toxicant.

*But what type?*

From experience I knew Charmers could hide their blessing. Voids smelled of chemical burns when they wielded. But the third type, they were more difficult to identify. They gave off a false scent, natural but entirely deceptive. A pleasant odour over an unpleasant one. But I had no experience encountering one. I told Rhydian as much. His answer was to encourage me to help him find us the vehicle ignition keys. Which unfortunately required us to separate.

I headed to the north end, Rhydian the south and when one of us had found the keys the other was to call out. Vehicle after vehicle, I found nothing. I'd just about given up when a glint of metal drew my eyes. I found a set of keys still in the ignition.

*"Rhydian, I found them. Where are you?"*

Glass shattered somewhere in the warehouse. *"Rhydian?"*

***"I'm a little busy at the moment. Maybe you can get the car started?"***

Another crash. A heavy thud, followed by metal being warped, the sound bouncing off the warehouse's tin-panelled walls.

I climbed atop the car. There in the middle of the warehouse was Rhydian. Fighting.

Praying that the snowmobile lessons Taren had given me prevented me from driving the truck right through a wall, I climbed

into the leather seat and turned the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life. Following Rhydian's scent, I drove in the direction of the fight.

Flashes of red drew my eye, so I jacked the wheel to my right. The figure attacking him turned out to be a giant of a woman. Wearing the mottled grey smock of a military Thrall, yet fighting like a soldier, the woman attacked Rhydian empty-handed. Every strike of her hands he defended back with what looked to be a steel pipe.

With every strike she attempted, Rhydian forced her hands to make contact with the pipe, avoiding skin-to-skin contact.

This kind of avoidance meant only one thing. The woman was a Viper. A Toxicant whose very body was poisonous, whether it was their skin, or bodily fluid, or even the air they released from their lungs, their target would not know until it was too late. Vipers were the reason their kind were named Toxicants.

What was he doing, why wasn't he taking control of her?

She brutally threw him into the side of a truck, and for a moment he vanished out of view as the Viper converged on him.

I passed the bodies of the two soldiers on the floor, both alive but unconscious. When I looked back up, the Viper had cornered Rhydian.

*"Rhydian take control of her!"*

There was a grunt as someone was punched. ***"I can't. The toxin is fluid-based. Her blood could be poisonous."***

*FUCK!*

I slammed my foot down on the gas, desperate to reach him before the Viper caught one of the pipes and ripped it from his grasp. But my hope was short-lived. One of the pipes made a horrible clapping noise when it connected with the palms of her hands. She yanked hard and flung the pipe over her shoulder, the metal clanging loudly when the pipe ricocheted off one of the steel pillars that supported the warehouse roof.

A scream ripped out of Rhydian as he tried to hold her off with just the one pipe, the woman's hands gripping the steel as if her life depended on it. If she were any other woman, he would have

thrown her off, but he was terrified of touching her, the sweet scent of fear repugnant in that moment.

When I couldn't drive the car any further, I jumped from it heading straight for the pair. Terror clung to my name as Rhydian cried out for me, right before my body collided with the Vipers. The metal pipe rang a hollow tune as it hit the stone floor. I attempted to roll over, to regain my footing, but my leg was yanked back. I spun to kick her but she was faster, pouncing on me like a cat.

I'd seen Drake venom before, the green and yellow liquid thin like water, but this—the secretion was thick, the mucus clear as it threatened to drip from her lips.

She took one long look at me and then spat.

Searing pain shot through my eyes as a visceral growl ripped up my throat. I heard a grunt and the Viper's weight upon my body vanished. The pain was so excruciating I couldn't think. I reached for my eyes only to be halted when Rhydian yelled out quite desperately, ***"Don't touch your face!"***

I attempted to use the cloth he gave me to remove the majority of the mucus. The agony of the venom was like a fire-poker through both eye sockets. I gritted my teeth telling myself, I'd had worse, but in the moment, I'd had nothing worse. Red filled my vision instead, and the world turned scarlet. *Had he handed me a piece of his bloody shirt?*

My stomach twisted. There was another worse option.

*"Rhydian am I bleeding?"* His blurred figure rushed towards me, the cloth in my hand ripped and thrown away.

"Fuck!" he said aloud. "Stay put. Don't move." Then in quick succession, he pulled Etrina from my boot and moved directly over the long shadow on the floor in front of me. Even through the hazy vision, I could make out his form over the Viper.

I heard flesh submitting to the sharp edge of a blade, the trickling of blood as it poured from a gaping wound, and then a more horrific noise. Of an organ being removed from a body.

The scent of blood perfumed the air again, and just as it settled in my nose, the scent of the organ he had removed from the Viper vanished.

Now unable to see clearly, my vision darkening, I asked him what he'd done.

*"Hopefully preserved your eyesight."*

Somewhere on the northern side, the door we'd come through swung open violently, followed by at least a dozen soldiers running into the building.

*"We need to get out of here."*

He took hold of my hand and pulled me to my feet. I could barely make out the shape of the vehicle, that Rhydian had to guide me into the passenger seat before climbing in himself. Another profanity left his lips. *"What's wrong?"*

***"Nothing. Hold on."*** With the engine still running, Rhydian pressed down hard on the gas and the car slammed into motion. I knew we drove north but without being able to see, he could have been driving us into a wall.

Bullets were fired. I had to clamp my hands over my ears to muffle the sound. Without my eyes working my ears were trying to compensate. Sound was amplified. If the Kensillans hadn't been paranoid their quarry would get their hands on their weapons, Rhydian and I would probably be riddled with holes.

Air abruptly whistled through the car, attempting to break through the seals. A sign we'd made it outside. I expected Rhydian to keep driving, but he rammed his foot on the brakes.

***"Come on. We have to jump."***

*"Jump? Jump where?"*

My door opened, the cold air stinging my eyes, the red now a dark crimson. Rhydian's hand took mine, hastily pulling me from the car until he'd dragged me several meters across what felt like grass.

***"Do you trust me?"***

I doubted in its current, and likely mangled state, my face correctly conveyed my astonishment.

*"No I don't trust you, but I have no other choice do I?"* I tried to convince myself he was doing it for me. That he cared about me. But that voice in the back of my head believed otherwise. The words *private acquisition* replayed in a vile echo off the walls of my mind.

Boots beat down behind us urging Rhydian to move me forward, towards the rushing chorus of a river below.

"*Don't let go,*" I found myself pleading, the words spoken before I could stop myself.

His pulse seemed to steady as his grip tightened on my hand. "***If you wish it.***"

Rhydian ran, I followed, and the world became nothing but air.



I'd gone cliff diving once. We had travelled to Bell Harbor because my father was stationed there for a season and all the local teenagers would sneak off to the bluffs and dare one another to jump. The water had been freezing then too. But at least it wasn't a rushing torrent.

Icy cold water threatened to engulf my lungs when I pierced the surface like an arrow, my shoulder nearly pulled from the socket as the current attempted to yank me from Rhydian's grasp. But his grip was steadfast.

I could hear nothing but that rushing torrent as it beat at my ears, roaring like a monster from a folk story. Over and over again the water tried to consume me, to tear me from him, and yet he never let go.

***"Hold on,"*** he said, ***"Just a little longer, we're almost there."*** But *there* smelled like the ocean. *There* was death.

My body was on the verge of giving up, my muscles aching, the fear of being unable to see my oncoming death oddly comforting, when the current began to slow.

I found myself lying face down, salt on my tongue. Off in the distance, waves crashed against rock. I stood and pebbles ground under my feet. We'd reached a shore.

Rhydian didn't give me much time to acclimate to our new surroundings. Our next task was reaching the rail tracks, which he then informed me were several hundred feet above us.

Up the cliff face.

"And how do you propose I get there, are you going to carry me on your back?" I didn't bother using my inner voice.

His hand shifted in mine and a moment later he was pressed up against me, the cliff at my back. I felt him lean in, his breath warm as it brushed my cheek. Slowly Rhydian moved my hand until it was flat against the cold stone. "I'll climb for you."

*Climb. Was he insane?*

The rock was rough beneath my hands, with jagged outcroppings and rounded ridges. It felt terrifying to touch, I couldn't even imagine climbing it. Yet Rhydian was asking permission to climb for me—through me?

"I need you to trust me that I'll get you to the top. Can you do that, can you trust me?"

Unless I wanted to die at the bottom of a cliff I didn't really have a choice. "Fine. Do it."

I heard the sound of a thousand threads being snapped as fabric was ripped, followed by Rhydian's boots on the gravel. The air shifted around me as I felt him circle me, coming to a standstill at my back when he then placed something over my eyes. The fabric was smooth under my fingers. I tried not to think about what it reminded me of. "To protect your eyes," he said as he fastened it.

*What was left of them!*

The venom had been harsh. It had sizzled and burned every moment since the Viper had spat at me. The pain only subsided when the river had washed it from my face. Even under the soft fabric of the makeshift eye-shield, my skin was raw.

I thought I was prepared to make the connection with him this time. The fact I knew he was doing it should have kept me calm. But when my legs moved forward against my will, my body reacted violently.

*No no no no. Not now. Fuck. Get it together Rieka!*

But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't get my breathing under control.

My body felt wrong. My heart rate was calm, but my breathing was uncontrollable. Heavy, rapid breaths.

*Was I hyperventilating?*

My body suddenly stopped moving, and I felt Rhydian touch me, his hands gentle as they grasped my arms. "Rieka, You need to stop panicking."

"I can't. Please just...can't you just block it all out?" I pleaded.

Rhydian's voice remained calm. Soft. "No. I need to feel through you. So you need to calm down."

I growled through gritted teeth. "I. Can't."

*Of course I can't. He's about to send me up a fucking cliff and I can't see. And I'm going to fall to my death because I trusted a Bloodhound to save my life.*

The hands that held me firm, started to slide down my arms where my hands were fisted at my hips. Gently, Rhydian took them both in his and lifted them. Cupping one hand in his palm, he rested it over his chest.

"Do you feel that?" he asked, as he placed my other hand against my own chest. "Concentrate on the sensation. My heart. Your heart. They beat as one."

Rhydian's heart beat steadily against the palm of my hand. And in perfect synchronicity, my heart matched it. Beat for beat.

"Now I need you to breathe with me. There you go. In and out. Nice slow breaths. Good." As he spoke, my breathing finally returned to normal, he took the hand on his chest and moved, his body no longer under my touch. I could feel him shifting and sensed his presence as he circled my body until his chest was flat against my back where I could once again feel his heartbeat.

He kept his hand on mine. "I need you to trust me," he said as he guided me forward. Guided, not puppeted. He led, I followed.

I felt the cliff face beneath my hand a moment later, his hand still atop mine like a shield. "This is all it is. This is all I am doing." Rhydian moved my other hand from my chest to the cliff, inviting me to feel the rough stone.

We were so close I could feel his lips brush my ear. "I will not let you fall."

My hand moved up according to his will and the panic didn't come. Now it felt different, a whispered suggestion my body craved to obey.

My body was still my own. Rhydian was just the guide. My eyes, getting me to where I could not see.

The climb was slow and arduous. I could feel every movement of my body. The movements were unfamiliar, yet my body knew exactly which rock to grip. My feet knew which perches to take. My body knew which angles to align myself in as though I had done it a thousand times. After the first few feet, my body seemed to relax into the sensation, and so I focused on Rhydian, on the sound our hearts made as they beat together.

Sometimes I could sense him beside me, other times beneath me. But I could always feel him.

I didn't know how far up we were when the cold started to get to me. We'd come out of the river soaking wet and moved straight into the climb that I never had a chance to warm up. Rhydian was beside me when my teeth started chattering like a damn nutcracker.

When he offered to make me warmer, I didn't object. His hand touched my cheek and like a stoked hearth, warmth spread through my body and remained long after the absence of his touch.

He continued our ascent without saying another word. An hour into the climb, I could taste my blood on the air, the skin of my fingers grazing the rock, blistering from the unfamiliar use. But not once did my grip falter.

The familiar pull of magnetics hummed above. I could feel Rhydian beside me as he made the final push to the top. I made it over the ledge, the sensation of cold steel wonderfully familiar under my hands.

"Where are we?" I asked when Rhydian finally joined me on the platform. I'd pressed myself against the wall to shield myself from the wind that howled through the gap.

"Under the tracks," he said, tucking in beside me. "The rail will be here before sunrise."



"So we just wait?"

"Unless you have something else to pass the time."

I turned towards him. Even without seeing his face, I knew there was a cocky smile there because of the insinuation. I opened my mouth to make some scintillating retort, but instead, the words that came out were "Thank you."

His scent flickered and altered for a split second, his perfectly maintained control faltering, but it was enough. I'd surprised him.

It hadn't been intentional. I hadn't done it to get a reaction out of him. I was genuinely thankful he hadn't decided to leave me at the bottom of the cliff, or in the warehouse. Whatever his reasons were for choosing to help me here, I doubted they were as confusing as my own.

Nothing about my decision to run from the convoy made sense to me. I'd seen Rhydian run off in the woods and my first reaction had been to run after him. I'd hesitated until the convoy was moving again and hesitated again when I had asked the Bright in our truck if someone who wasn't a Bright could use the shard she held. It was not until I had it in my hands that I decided to go after him.

I'd never felt like this before. Angry at someone for nothing. Rhydian's life was his own, he could throw it away if he wished. But even that thought made me angry. How could he consider his life less valuable than anyone else's?

I doubted he expected some asshole to cut him up when he intentionally caused a distraction. Death hadn't been his goal. I knew his intention had been to let us reach the train, to get safely back on board. But the idea of doing that without him, of being on board without him...It vexed me.

He vexed me.

*Your father vexed me to no end when we first met. Funny how that's often how it starts.*

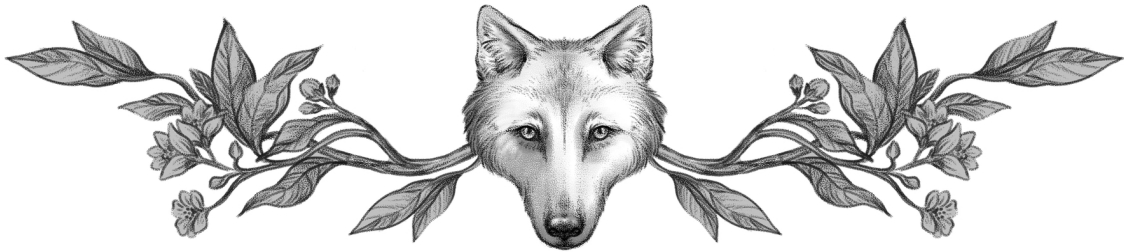
My stomach somersaulted as my mother's words returned to me, sending the last remnants of wilful denial down the cliff. My hands fisted in my lap.

*No. I will not let your words contort my feelings, mother. You are not here. You do not know him.*

Rhydian had made a deal to sell me as a slave. He had given me hope of survival, even if it was a slim one. He sold Kris as a slave!

*I will not—I cannot fall in love with this man!*

But in the dark, with his scent enveloping me, my body embraced in his arms as we huddled for warmth in the night, that anger was beginning to feel irrational.



## RIEKA

The rail arrived exactly when Rhydian said it would. Then three minutes later, we were scooped up by a water catchment ramp under the train's generator carriage, the engine it seemed was hydroelectric.

It turned out that the organ I'd detected Rhydian had collected from the Viper was her venom sack. The key component to reversing the effects of Toxicant venom, and he cut it right out of her throat.

For me.

I'd been required to stay in *MedCom* overnight so Sal could synthesise the treatment, a salve that felt just as horrible as the mucous venom had. She assured me that it would work, that I wouldn't have any side effects, then surprisingly Rhydian had asked if my eyes would be the same after—if the colour would be altered.

"They will be as they were," was Sal's response.

His relief made the air taste like rain.

I contemplated pretending to sleep, in the hopes he would leave, but I needn't have bothered. The council called for a meeting soon after and he left, leaving his scent behind to taunt me.

I learned from S'vara and Tira that the council had had several meetings in my absence, and when Eelen had come by to check on

me later that night, claiming boredom as the reason, she told me I was the topic of conversation. Not an encouraging thought.

I remained in the carriage all night, forced to wait whilst the salve reversed the majority of effects on my eyes. When I'd awoken in the night I knew Rhydian was there, even before I detected his scent. My sleep was dreamless. I welcomed the sound of his soft steady breaths as he slept in the chair by my bed. But when I awoke in the morning, my dream having returned to me, I knew he was gone.

It was late afternoon before Sal was able to mend my eyes, and evening when I'd showered off the remnants of the climb and finally re-joined my bunkmates in *The Commons*.

According to S'vara, the train hosted a talent show every few months, and Tira had decided to participate. *The Theatre* was full, a jovial chorus of cheers and laughter as passengers packed the space like an overfilled cake tin. All their focus was on the six figures on stage.

Difficult as it was—even the aisles were packed with passengers watching the show—I managed to see the biggest draw for this particular performance.

Rhydian sat on a stool beside two others and was receiving a makeover by three very serious young children, one being Ghena.

Not wanting to distract from the show, I found an empty seat to my right and took it, discovering Lera in the seat beside me. She remained quite nonchalant to the sight, whilst the rest of the row, the Runners, all desperately tried to contain their laughter.

A bright red sheer material wrapped around Rhydian's body, draped in a way that resembled something short of a robe, the markings on his chest shimmering under the lights of *The Theatre*. Ghena who had draped the material, moved away to allow the second little girl to approach Rhydian. She then lifted her hands and weaved the pieces together.

A little Spindle.

Of the other two figures I only knew Jae. The suit he'd been draped in was a dazzling yellow that had a massive collar that stuck up at a right angle like a sail. The woman who sat on the other stool I only recognised in passing. She was a Drake who worked regularly

in *The Greenhouse*. The scales on her skin kept mimicking the green material wrapped around her torso.

The third little one was a young boy who kept weaving between the three adults, physically tying ribbons and bows in their hair in a rather bombastic fashion. From the musicians' pit, a passenger played a piece filled with anticipation, as if we had reached the climax of a play.

Finally, the little boy dramatically raised his hands into the air and beheld a crown to the crowd. A great chorus of awws and oohs filled the space. His attempt to place it on Rhydian's head failed due to their size difference, so the giant man climbed off his stool and knelt before the little boy.

As if it were a divine gift, the little boy carefully placed the delicately twisted ringlet of kitchen cutlery on Rhydian's head.

With the makeovers complete, the three adults stood and came forward to present themselves to the crowd. The Runners all jumped to their feet.

"Hurrah!" they shouted

"Great work!"

"Masterpieces."

The trio stepped back and gave the stage to the three little artists whose cheers were even louder.

I leaned closer to Lera. "What did I just watch?"

"He does this every year. Volunteers himself to the littles for the talent show." Over her shoulder, her twin brother Lex leaned forward. "Last show he was a magician's assistant, let himself get cut in half."

There was a small gasp down the row and the three of us turned our heads to find Sal had abruptly stood from her seat. As she scrambled to exit the row, I noticed the way in which she once again fiddled with the seam of her shirt. It was only due to the crowded state of the carriage, and the difficulty in manoeuvring the cramped space that I had enough time to see why. Sal had a button missing on her shirt.

A pit opened in my stomach as a memory surfaced. A darkness began to tetter at the edge of my mind. It roiled with anger.

Blood red and smelling like sweet limes.

I excused myself, though Lera paid me no mind and I made my way back to the sleeper carriage, the sinking feeling in my gut threatening to overwhelm me.

Belief that someone should be carrying a reminder of Bennic, if only to remember he existed was the only reason I had kept his keepsake. That thought repulsed me now as I climbed into the bunk and searched my cupboard. The round metal disk felt ice cold now.

For what felt like an hour, I stared at it, at his trophy. The thought was repugnant. The image of the smile he had worn when I had asked him about it made my stomach churn.

Wade had been the target of all my initial anger at being on the train, using Bennic as an excuse, and he'd taken it without complaint. I had hated him for being so nonchalant about Bennic's death and yet his reasons were warranted.

He'd said it. A Charmer. The one he'd killed had been a Charmer. Where Void's nullified blessings and Vipers were living poison, a Charmer was considered benevolent, capable of influencing emotions and behaviour for the better. They were a benefit to society. Carers, peacemakers. They were justices like Tomas, keeping the traumatized newcomers to the train like myself calm after surviving the Lobby. But Bennic was not that, not if what I believed was true. Sal's reaction to her examination made it so clear.

The passage to *MedCom* was quiet, most busy in the commons, so Sal was alone when I found her sorting through one of the boxes we had brought back from the compound. I'd barely been there thirty seconds when she slowly inclined her body towards the entrance. "Rieka, is something wrong, are your eyes ok?"

I knew the type of commitment it took to push those kinds of thoughts aside, to focus on external issues rather than what was going on in your head. Sal had mastered the art of suppression.

"I have something that belongs to you, though it took me this long to realise it." I closed the short distance between us, unfortunately noticing how much paler she was than she had been earlier today, as though the thoughts had drained the life out of her.

"May I have your hand?" I asked, aware of the kind of boundaries I should not cross without permission.

Sal lifted her hand towards me. I took it gently, noticing the slightest but familiar flinch when we made contact. In the palm of her hand, I placed the button and her fist closed around it.

When she ran her fingers over the surface of the black disk, I noticed how much thinner they were than when she'd first tended to me.

Nothing I could say would be of help, not really. Not enough to erase the trespass she felt. But the part of me that relished in the destruction of those kinds of predators believed I needed to say something. I cleared my throat. "I can only speak from experience, but burning anything that reminded me of the incident helped."

Sal chose not to answer.

*"You did nothing wrong Salryah, always remember that. Nothing you could ever do would deserve that violation."*

I moved to depart but only reached the carriage threshold when her voice returned to her. "Does it ever go away?"

I chose my words carefully. "Find a way to reclaim your autonomy."

Her expression was so lost, so pained I wanted to sweep her into my arms and hold her. But Sal was not that type of person. That was what I had needed, which resulted in me finding unhealthy ways to cope with my own screwed-up trauma. Sal was smarter than me.

"Letting him linger in your life, even if it is just to prove to yourself that it did happen, that his blessing was used to violate you only serves him." My body shivered at the thought of immobility, of the kind of compulsion Bennic had had as a Charmer. "He's dead," I continued. "Let him rot with Veliah where he belongs."

By the time I reached the next carriage passage, my nose detected the smell of burning cotton. I knew Sal wouldn't be ok, not for a long time, maybe never. But at least I could hold out hope that in some small way I'd helped her retake the control he'd stolen from her.

When I arrived back in *The Theatre*, Rhydian was gone, and in his place was the last person I expected.

During my last Ascension Cycle, I'd been lucky enough to see the Aronbok Symphony Orchestra play at the Opera House, and aside from the fact I had never seen an orchestra perform before, I was fascinated by the conductor. How just the slightest movement of their hands caused drastic changes in the music. So to see Eleen on stage, dressed in a long white robe and waving her hands around in the exact same manner felt surreal, especially since it wasn't the musicians she was conducting. It was paint.

Streams of coloured liquid that rose from bowls on the floor and launched themselves at a giant white sheet that had been strung up across the stage. It was breathtaking. Like the night sky over Keltjar during summer when it rippled with colour.

I'd only ever heard of her blessing once, from my father when he spoke of his time fighting against the Pirate Queen's Armada. The individual could not only control the tide, but they escaped capture when tanks of oil the Deogn ships carried exploded, and the oil jumped from ship to ship, allowing the Pirate Queen's Kindlings to set them all on fire. From what he could tell me, they were so rare, if there was a name for the blessing, no one alive knew it.

It was oddly comforting knowing I wasn't the rarest person on the train, though Eleen would never hear that from me.

"Ree!" came S'vara's hushed voice. I looked away from the performance and joined her on the row our bunkmates had commandeered. "I didn't miss it did I?"

S'vara shook her head. "No, she's next."

No sooner had she spoken did the music stop and Eleen end her performance. She then quickly removed all traces of paint from the stage and walked off it. Like it never happened.

A soft melody began to play as a Bright aimed their Luminos to the stairs of the stage, and there stood Tira.

Even with her hooves still present, Tira had not been deterred. Graceful and demure, she flittered across the stage in spins and twirls, leaping in bounds across the hardwood surface, her feet so light nothing but a soft tap could be heard. Her antlers had grown several inches these last two weeks and they were now long enough that she had twisted her hair around them and into a halo with the



help of Farox. A style one of his three sisters had taught him worked well with Drake horns.

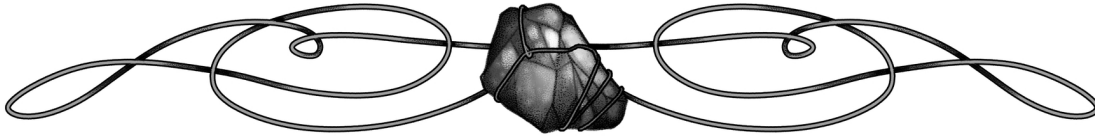
Since arriving on the train, she had never looked this... free.

"Someone has an admirer." From the end of our row, Farox indicated to a young man sitting in front of us. Even without seeing his face, I knew the boy had a crush on her. On a person that young, desire had a floral scent, not yet tainted by sexual cravings.

There was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and found Ghena smiling at me, and sitting beside her, with a rather determined look on her face, was Lily.

"Please don't ask me to do a makeover, my hair couldn't take it," I begged in a hushed whisper, clinging to the end of the braid.

Lily smiled in amusement. "How would you feel about a baking class?"



## RHYDIAN

I'd thought perhaps, after returning to the train things would be different. Instead, *she* was indifferent. Rieka acted as though she hadn't risked her life to save mine. To risk her life for a man who she claimed to hate, to wish was dead, believing all that she does about me, and still choosing to rescue me regardless. It was utterly ridiculous.

I'd sat with her all night as her eyes were mended, hoping just once, for a word, anything so we might talk about what happened, about why she came to my rescue when she could just have easily stayed on the train. No one knew of our deal. She would have remained on the train, but she would have been rid of the Bloodhound. Instead, I'd been met with absolute indifference to what had happened.

And then after the talent show, she went and fell asleep in my arms, as if that wasn't the absolute worst thing she could have done. For two hours I tried to get those damn bows out of my hair, her laughter at my struggle striking low in my stomach. And in the end, she put on a show for her bunkmates and helped me get them out.

If I weren't certain how much she hated me for what I did to Kris, I would have sworn on her damn Celestials that it was done in

earnest.

I'd spent the last two days trying to take my mind off her. With the success of the raid, the council had never been more on our side than they were now. And it was all thanks to Rieka.

One of the Runners had let it slip that we had voted in Rieka as a Runner—my coin was on Lily. The council had demanded to know why. My position made it impossible to withhold that information, at least the part they requested. They had spent all day before the talent show debating the merits of a Runner who was immune to Toxicant Traps, debating what benefits that would hold for our people in the long run, as well as her position by my side. And most importantly if she could aid in freeing all the passengers? Since the council was split they agreed to enforce both decisions.

The first. If Rieka was indeed immune to traps, and the mission to the factory could now go ahead, then she needed to be trained and protected.

And the second. In order to achieve this, since leadership of the Runners fell to me, the council saw fit to extend my timeframe. I now had another year before I had to take my grandfather's position on the council. But it had a condition.

I was forbidden from leaving the train for anything other than *that* mission. No supply runs. Their reasoning—the more time I spent on the train with her, the more likely she was to produce an heir to take my place in twenty-five years.

So now I was utterly fucked.

The point of going on all those supply runs was distance. If I had distance, I wouldn't think about her. If I had distance I wouldn't dream about her or a future we might have. Distance gave me time to figure out a way to get out of the deal with the buyer. To save her. To save everyone.

Now I was going to be on the train with her every hour of every day. My thoughts on nothing but her. I'd spent the last three weeks taking cold showers before bed just to keep my dick down because being so close to her, touching her during one-on-one training was making it near impossible to not want her.

The first sign of sex being even a possibility with Rieka and all my senses were thrown from the train. I doubted she even knew what effect she had on me.

I couldn't close my eyes at night without seeing her. Her scent perfumed my pillow, the touch of her fingers lingered on my chest. It was agonising how much I thought about her, how much I dreamed about my hands on her body. Squeezing her thighs and kissing the lips of her pussy. It was utter torture.

Because even with her hatred for me, the worst part was that I wanted her to want me back.

How fucked up was that?

I'd put her in an impossible position, made even more impossible by the fact I'd had the perfect opportunity to stop this had I just turned that godsdamned horse around back in the slave camp when she'd recognised me. If I'd just done that, maybe everything would have been different? Maybe Rieka would actually want me instead of the freedom being with me could grant her?

I'd gone through every possible scenario, every way out of the deal I'd struck. And there was only one path forward. But even if we succeeded, even if with her help we managed to free all the passengers, one of us would still be living on borrowed time.

The note I'd found on my pillow, the one that smelled of her crumpled in my hand as I forced the thoughts from my head.

*I wish to add an amendment to the conditions. Lily asked me to teach the little ones to bake. I left early to prepare for the class. I will make it up in training tonight.*

I took a cold shower and attempted to detangle my mess of a head with balm and soap, and then spent the next hour sparring with Mal and Jordry. They finally collapsed at half-six to catch their breaths. I

was stretching out my own anxiety-ridden muscles when I noticed my grandfather enter *The Fight Hall*.

"I thought you would be watching your wife's class this morning?" he asked when I jogged over.

"She didn't tell me when it started." A fact I only now just realised.

Grandfather leaned on his cane. "Care to accompany me then?"

I glanced over at Mal and Jordry collapsed on the mat, chests heaving. Perhaps training wasn't the best outlet for my frustrations if I was taking it out on my friends.

I quickly retrieved my shirt and joined my grandfather.

"You seem frustrated," he noted as we headed in the direction of *The Kitchen*.

"Is it that obvious?"

My grandfather tipped his head. "Only to those who know you."

I remained silent. Unsure of anything I could say that wouldn't betray our bet.

"Have you spoken about it to your mother?"

My pace slowed. Grandfather rarely talked of my mother. The topic was too hard and too derisive for either of us. He'd never agreed to her decision, and she had never forgiven him for his. But when he brought her up it was usually because he was worried about me.

He changed the subject when he realised I wasn't going to answer. "Rieka paid me a visit this morning."

I abruptly stopped. When I asked him why, his answer was about as surprising as things could get in this place.

I repeated his answer. "She asked if I would like a cake for my birthday?" Even I thought I sounded incredulous.

*How does she even know when my birthday is?*

It wasn't a secret. It just wasn't a topic I liked to think about—the collar around my grandfather's neck being the glaring reason why.

"What did you tell her?" I asked him, noticing the crowd forming in the passage between the carriages.

"When have you ever said no to cake?"

He had a point.

"She asked if you liked citrus fruit. Apparently, she knows a wonderful sweet lime recipe and asked if she could have a few from

my tree, I hope it is ok that I said yes?"

I honestly didn't know how I felt. No one had ever offered to bake me anything before.

We continued in silence until we reached the passage between *The Greenhouse* and *The Kitchen*.

The crowd was unusual. Lily and the others on kitchen roster had made a habit of keeping *The Kitchen* doors closed. But the answer quickly became apparent. It was not just the littles in *The Kitchen* today, both passages were crowded with passengers watching Rieka.

It benefited me that they all believed us married. I was able to relegate myself to a position just out of her sight, but where I could see everything.

Flour dusted the counter like snow, white marks smeared across her face like paint. Standing on the wooden packing boxes we used to load supplies stood over a dozen littles, their faces equally smeared with white.

On the counter stood a sack of flour, a bowl of salt, jugs of water and a bowl of what looked like the foam from a mug of ale.

Rieka was teaching them to make bread I realised.

For two hours I watched her instruct the class on exactly how to make such a *household staple* as she called it. A commodity which a rare few, my sister included knew how to make. And with the number of passengers on the train, I doubted she was teaching them because she thought the train needed more bread - which it did. But perhaps—

We'd never actually spoken about why the Runners volunteer as they do. So it wouldn't be feasible to think Rieka was teaching them a skill for afterwards, for when growing grain was a real possibility?

She rubbed the back of her hand across her cheek, spreading the flour further, the white powder smearing the corner of her mouth. She absentmindedly licked it.

One of the littles called her Lady Kanyk, and my heart jumped. Rieka didn't seem phased by the address.

*When had they started calling her that?*

She glided across the space, moving to a little to help him pour his water into his bowl where she then instructed him on how to

correctly stir the mixture. The smile never left her. It was the same one I'd first seen her wear in the town square of Keltjar. All those months ago. Joyous, exuberant and at peace.

By the end of the two hours, one hundred small buns were baking in the oven, and I was ready to kick my sister out of *The Kitchen*.

Rieka had agreed to the condition after all. I knew committing to it meant I would lose this bet. But right now, looking at her in her dishevelled but happy state, I'd never found her more irresistible.

With my hands safely detained in my pockets for the moment, I meandered through the departing crowd and only cleared my throat when the last of the passengers had left.

"Rhydian," my sister said from over the counter. "I didn't know you came to watch?"

"I hadn't planned on it. But I thought I'd surprise my wife," I answered without taking my eyes off Rieka. From behind the counter, she fixed me with a heated gaze.

It was now very clear to me, this was a state in which she turned me on. Apron wrapped around her waist and flour smeared on her cheek.

*So fucking beautiful.* I feared if I looked away she would vanish because a god was so enamoured by her beauty they had stolen her for themselves.

Rieka knew what I wanted without me saying a word. **"Come to make me regret, have you?"**

The corner of my mouth quirked up. *"You reap what you sow."*

"Lily, why don't you go and rest? Rhydian can help me clean up," Rieka suggested without breaking eye contact.

"Really, oh that would be—oh you two!" A small huff escaped her when she realised what we were asking. I knew she couldn't object. Especially since I'd caught her and Jae in here a few times.

"Just not on the counter," she said as she headed for the door. "And please, clean the countertop. I do not need your asses reflecting back at me when I'm stewing dinner."

The door had barely sealed shut when I marched around the bench, wrapped my hands around her thighs and lifted her atop the counter. The smallest of gasps escaped her, which only made me

want this more. I slid my hands around to the front of her trousers only to find the fastening more than I bargained for.

She stared up at me with an expression of satisfaction. Rieka pursed her lips. "Do you require my aid, husband?"

After a minute, her pants just refusing to budge, my frustration forced me to give in. I took a step back and gestured to her. "If you would be so kind."

Slowly, Rieka raised herself on the counter until she was standing atop it, her gaze down upon me, staring at me from beneath those icy white lashes. Testing my patience, she removed the apron first. Slowly. When it dropped to the countertop, she let her fingers crawl to her waistband cord and left them lingering on her left hip.

Words bubbled up in my throat threatening to come out if she did not rid herself of those pants in the next few seconds. She smirked.

With one quick movement, the pants fell loose to her hips and stopped, the fabric caught teasingly between her kissing thighs. I grasped her from behind, the flesh of her ass cheeks supple in my hands and I lowered her back down onto the counter.

A shocked cry escaped as her naked ass kissed the cold steel. I quickly removed my jacket and slid it beneath her, shielding her from the cold.

I ran my hands down the outside of her thighs as she leaned back, hands bracing herself against the countertop. Slowly I caressed the tops of her thighs until the skin beneath my fingers raised, her body reacting to my touch. I used that moment to part her legs and knelt before her.

I wouldn't tease her like she teased me. I wanted her too much to wait. I lifted her legs and adjusted one in the crook of my elbow to hold her in place, where I had the perfect view of the ebony masterpiece before me. I leaned in and kissed the inside of her thigh, a soft satisfied moan slipping past her lips as I trailed them along the soft skin. Her breath hitched upon my discovery of her most sensitive area.

I do the same along her other leg, starting at her ankle. Kissing the spot on the inside of her knee, lingering on the thickest part of her thigh and sucking just enough that another moan slipped out.



But when I reached the sensitive skin between her leg and her pussy I kissed the top of her mound instead.

I slipped my fingers inside and as I parted her, I ran my tongue through her.

The stuttering moan my kiss received only made me want more. I buried my face inside of her, delighting in the delectable moans that she tried to muffle as my tongue made torturous circles. Perhaps *I* was a tease. The more she moaned as my tongue fucked her, the more I wanted to hear that sound.

My tongue penetrated her, and she tightened around me. I withdrew it, just enough that my name slipped from her lips. Rieka whimpered, her hand reaching down to grip my hair.

Again, I kissed her, burying my face in her pussy, penetrating her at a leisurely pace that her grip possessively tightened on my hair, and she swore in her native tongue. Something that sounded an awful lot like a prayer.

I fucked her until she begged me to let her come.

She collapsed back onto the counter, her chest rising and falling heavily as the results of her satisfaction fell onto the lining of my jacket, forever marking her territory. The kind of scent that left a mark, a claim.

I collapsed back onto *The Kitchen* floor. Another perfect view.

Rieka laughed, the muscles in her thighs clenching wondrously. "A few more of those and you might just be right," she said, her voice echoing off the steel-plated walls.

I would gladly accept that challenge.

So the next day, I made her come in the washroom of a sleeper she didn't sleep in.

The day after that, in the closet to my office.

That afternoon and the one after that, she came several times in the darkness of *The Pipe Room*, the sound of the filtration system loud enough to shield the sounds she made.

I made her come every day for the next week.

Tonight, because Rieka had another baking class we'd had to schedule another late-night training session, a particularly gruelling one. She made it impossible with her snarky comments, and her

incessant flirting to not want to fuck her right there on the mat. When I'd finally had enough I picked her up, threw her over my shoulder and took her to the one place we hadn't marked yet.

To *The Aviary*, where I made her come among lilacs and honeysuckles.



As we lay beneath its domed skylight, under the twinkling souls of the God Sphere, amongst the night blooms, Rieka's fingers slowly made their way up my shirt. Inching closer and closer to my Sul.

However intimate we were, those tattoos were only ever permitted to be touched by the one I give my heart to, my Dana.

And whilst a part of me knew just how close I was to letting that be her, I knew if she attempted to touch them I would have to stop her.

I waited for her to make contact with the inked skin. But she never did. Rieka's hand stopped, her fingers instead drawing patterns on my stomach where my shirt had risen.

***"How do you do it?"***

I glanced down at her, her chin resting atop my stomach where she had draped herself. *"Do what?"* I asked, trying not to focus on the movements of her fingers as she replicated the patterns of the runes into the fabric of my shirt.

***"How do you hide your blessing from everyone on the train? From Eelen and Jordry? How do they not know you're a Hemopath?"***

Those grey eyes were wide, full of keen interest that I almost didn't want to answer just to keep her looking at me in that way.

*"I mask my taint. Make myself appear and smell human."*

She drew the rune for 'home' when she spoke again. ***"But why do they follow you, why do any of the Runners follow you if***

***they believe you're human? Your problems are not the same."***

I sighed heavily, leaning back on the crook of my arm. The stars above seemed to leer at me, daring me to look her in the eyes and lie. Again.

I chose the truth. *"Because I can blend into Naven society and because I'm as stuck as they are. My family have been the caretakers of the train since its inception. By council law when we turn twenty-five we have to remain on the train."*

Rieka scoffed, an incredulous look on her face. ***"And who made up that law?"***

*"The ones who made this prison."*

Her expression told me she was trying to find meaning behind my words. ***"Has anyone ever broken that law?"***

Again I told her the truth. *"One ancestor. 400 passengers died as a consequence before he returned to the train."*

I watched her expression as she contemplated my words. Shock and disgust. I expected her to make a comment, spew curses or go off on a rant about what bastards our wardens were. Instead, Rieka lay back down, shifting my other arm into a pillow for her head and pressed her body into mine as she turned to gaze at the God Sphere above us.

***"So how do you do it then, mask yourself from other Blessed?"***

With her head so close to me, her hair catching in my beard it was impossible not to smell her. Cinnamon, freshly baked bread and honey.

*"My family's always called it Conversion. We can take another's blood and our body metabolises it and for several hours we exhibit the traits of the one whose blood we ingested."*

Rieka shifts against me.

*"Does that disgust you?"* I asked, looking down at her.

***"It's not what I expected to hear. But your taint is one of the more unusual, so I shouldn't be surprised there's more to it than being a lapdog."*** She smirked at her own comment.

Relief flooded me and I couldn't help but smile. *"At least I don't enjoy sleeping in piles of sweat-addled bodies."*

Rieka rolled around to look at me. "I reject that stereotype," she said aloud. "The sweaty bodies are usually due to group sex."

"Oh really," I laughed into my words. "Since when was sexual revelry permitted within the Ecclesiarchy?"

"Since 358," she said with a cocked brow. "We have an annual festival. The Celestial always encouraged procreation, especially during Lesan."

"Wait, really?" My question earned a confused expression from Rieka. "That's a real festival? Deogn Devos celebrate sex and fuck all over the city with anyone?"

"It's not that debauched," she chuckled, a strand of her hair falling across her brow at the movement. "Couples struggling to conceive participate in Lesan in the hopes of having a child. *I'm* a child of Lesan."

The black had grown so much in the last week that the colour had finally reached her ears. Delicate strokes of black ink on a white canvas. I knew it was stupid. I knew how she would interpret it, but I'd done it anyway. I brushed the strand behind her ear and told her I didn't know.

"Why would you? I don't publicise it. But I'm not ashamed of it."

She moved into a sitting position then, the absence of her body against mine unpleasant. "My mother wanted another child, and so she and my father participated together. I was born nine months later. I couldn't have asked for a better father."

I leaned back on my elbows, giving myself the perfect view of her. That buckskin vest flaring over her bare legs, her trousers discarded somewhere in the grass.

Rieka pulled her plait over her shoulder and immediately pulled the red leather tie from the end. I expected her to tidy the plait, but instead, she began wrapping the leather string around her wrist.

I watched as Rieka then tied a knot into the centre of the string before adding two more on either end and threaded them through one another, the leather forming a circlet. "Do you miss them?" I asked her.

Rieka paused with the string between her teeth, her inner voice replying. ***"That's a rhetorical question, right?"*** She pulled, snapping the excess off the leather circle she had created.

"Not at all. Not everyone has loving parents. Lex and Lera's abandoned them in Lantern Town because they didn't want the burden of bringing up two Skin Weavers."

If it hadn't been for the fact that Lantern Town used to be a Runner's haven, the twins would probably be dead.

Taking my hand from my stomach, Rieka proceeded to wrap the leftover length of leather string around my wrist.

"Were their parents not passengers of the train?" she asked when she began work on a second circlet.

"They were. Collarless, not Runners. They ran shortly after the twins were born. We can't choose who we're born to, but we can still choose our family."

A minute later, the second circlet complete Rieka spoke in a tone oddly quiet, even for her. "Do you know what Mogya means?"

The phrase she spoke was rough, but not unfamiliar. "It's the Brute term for mate."

Rieka slipped the smaller circlet over her wrist and slid one of the knots, the action tightening the loop. "Mogya Fyaak, *One who shares a soul* is the literal Gods' Tongue translation. One of the only phrases carried over from before the fall. No other phrase, in any language, had ever been able to embody its meaning since."

I didn't have a reason to doubt her words. After The Fall, the gods had purged Idica of all hand written tomes that had even a single word of Gods' Tongue held within its pages. What was left was partial transcriptions, of partial translations, of carvings in walls from a thousand years ago. It's one of the reasons why T'eiryashta are so feared. Their ability to speak the language of the gods makes them a living, breathing link to the days before The Fall.

"Is this you making a public declaration, Rieka?" The comment earned me a cocky grin and a foot to the ribs.

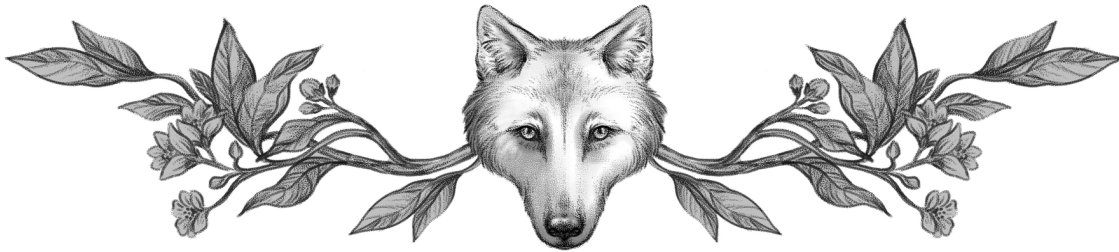
"In Deos, Brutes honour that relationship by wearing marriage bands. We usually braid coloured string but these will do." Rieka held out her palm, I assumed to ask for my hand. When I gave it to her,

she slipped the circlet over my wrist and tightened it, securing it in place.

I examined the "band" as she called it. The knot she had tied in the centre looped in on itself. It was identical to the one on her own wrist. I wanted to ask why. Marriage customs were sacred rituals, why commit one when our relationship was just an act?

I open my mouth, tempted to say the words when Rieka cut me off. "Now no one will question our relationship when we go to Lantern Town for your party."

"For the party. Of course." My words came out heavy. Sluggish. As if even my own tongue couldn't believe I had ever considered another meaning behind her actions.



## RIEKA

"You're not wearing that, are you?" Tira asked me as I studied my reflection.

It had been nine days since I'd put the marriage band around Rhydian's wrist, and in those nine days, I had finally managed to convince myself that it didn't matter that I had developed feelings for this man.

It didn't matter that every time he looked at me my heart skipped a beat. Metaphorically of course. And at some point in the last two weeks, since we'd escaped the garrison, I'd admitted to the fact I couldn't sleep unless he was beside me. An infuriating admonition.

But none of this mattered unless I got him to admit he was in love with me. Unless he committed to me that he wanted nothing more than my freedom. Even if it meant reneging on whatever deal he'd made with the buyer.

It was an utterly selfish goal, but it was the only comforting one.

Without it, I was betraying my promise to Taren to go after him. Without it, it was as if I didn't care about Kris anymore, that I had forgotten why I was here in the first place. To save her. To find her. Even if I had feelings for Rhydian, he was still to blame for kidnapping Kris. And I could never forgive him for that.

Nor could I forgive myself for giving in to those feelings.

I didn't deserve them.

So I would act like the doting wife because that is what this path required of me. I would use my affection for him to deepen his feelings for me, even if the thought of hurting him, of losing him as I almost had at the garrison broke me. I was culpable for my situation.

Whatever small piece of happiness I felt when I was with him, I was undeserving of it.

So now I stood in the washroom of our sleeper, contemplating how best to achieve my ends, whilst being judged by a fifteen-year-old Terrestrial who thought my attire entirely unsuitable for my "husband's" birthday party.

"I think you should wear this," Tira said as she ducked behind S'vara on the bunk to retrieve something from behind the she-wolf. The older woman found the entire situation amusing.

"I would have thought you'd have a better sense of style. Don't all Deogns wear silks and embroidered satins?" she mused as she weaved a series of ropes together, the traded item draped across her lap in several rows.

"Only Devoted can afford those kinds of garments," I corrected her, not inclined to remind her I was one for a time.

What Tira retrieved from the inside of their bunk was a rather large bundle of crimson-coloured fabric that when she held it up, I recognised. It was the garment that Ghena made for Rhydian at the Talent Show.

Though the lines were far improved. The cut was more flattering, and the waist was now fitted rather than loose as it had been on his body. "Did Rhydian give it to you?"

She immediately smiled. "He thought you might like it."

"Why didn't he give it to me?" He certainly could have, with how intimate we had been lately, I certainly would have thought him capable of giving me something as simple as a dress.

S'vara provided her own answer. "Probably because if he saw you in it, his dick would get hard and he'd have to rip it right back off. And it would be a waste of a perfectly good dress."



Tira rushed back over and displayed the dress over my chest. "It suits you. It's like you're wearing his jacket, don't you think?"

I honestly thought I would prefer Rhydian's jacket. I had not worn a dress like this in years, I wouldn't be surprised if I tripped in it the moment I stepped off the train.

"And you can wear your gloves if you want. I know how you like them."

I held a gloved hand over the fabric, the movement jostling the band on my wrist. "Maybe this once, I don't." Passengers here barely noticed my tattoo anymore, and those who did didn't care to ask about it. I could go a day without wearing them and I didn't bother me as much as I expected. Besides, I'd given Rhydian the band to show off. It wouldn't be fair if I covered it with a glove.

"Do you really think I should be wearing something like this? Don't you think it draws too much attention?" I ran my hand over the sheer crimson fabric, Lantern Town after all was said to accommodate more than just Blessed.

"It's romantic," Tira said as she began twisting my hair over my shoulder, the white strands a stark contrast to the crimson. Though I wondered how much longer they would stay that way, the black had reached my shoulders.

"Besides," Tira added. "It's for his birthday."

In the past week, the Runners had made a big deal out of it, as though his turning twenty-five was some exceptional milestone, aside from the fact he was still alive. But after that conversation we'd had in *The Aviary*, it probably had more to do with the fact he would remain uncollared for another year. He would be the resistance leader for another year before he too became a prisoner of the train.

Messages had been sent to Filora in Lantern Town for days as she and her Runners organised the party. Every passenger was expected to be in attendance tomorrow, the little ones being the exception.

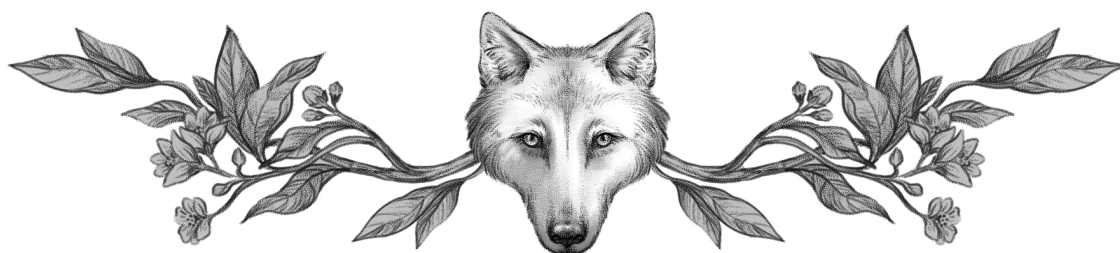
Tira fluffed up the skirts, revealing a split in the leg.

The scarlet had a metallic sheen to it that made it shimmer under the Bright-lights of the sleeper, a material similar to the crimson fabric Rhydian had worn in Old King's Town.

It really was lovely. Especially with the low-cut neckline and the gold embroidery. Someone had stitched what looked like pine leaves into the fabric across the waist and the neckline. And it had sleeves—long beautiful sheer bell cuffed sleeves that reached my wrists. It had more material than any dress I'd ever worn in Deos. That made it all the more appealing.

In the mirror, S'vara's reflection leaned back in the bunk, the knots she habitually tied I now realised were part of some kind of net. "We're prisoners, Ree, not dead. Live a little. Besides, when was the last time your husband saw you in something nice."

I open my mouth to comment but she cut me off. "And I don't mean your bare-naked ass."



## RIEKA

The stories my bunkmates heard those first few days onboard the rail were not an exaggeration. Lantern Town was indeed built into the cliff side. Departure from the train was only possible from one side and the station was only long enough to accommodate three carriages, so every passenger that wanted to depart from the train had a window of thirty minutes to do so. The train would then depart and wouldn't be back until the same time the next day.

I already knew that Rhydian and his friends were meeting Filora's Runners somewhere further in the town before the party began this evening, so I didn't expect to see any of them until later.

Which was good, since I'd made the sensible choice to remain with my bunkmates for the entire trip here. We were going to explore the town, eat real food that wasn't from a ration pack and we'd decided that come night fall, after the party we would all converge on a place where we could sleep under the stars, without a glass dome above us.

It really was the only option for us, since we'd heard most buildings were owned by locals. Though I had heard gossip that some of the Runners also lived here in some capacity when they were on runs. So perhaps they had a house.

Built directly into the rock, the wide station platform extended inward into cracks and caverns inside the cliff walls, forming a wide assortment of passages that felt more like a maze than a city. Bridges that seemed to vanish into walls and doors that lead nowhere, as if the place was unfinished. Market stalls lined the cracks like city alleyways, where timber storefronts had been built into alcoves forming a kind of bazaar.

We were still in Kensilla, yet the majority of those wandering between the stalls were Blessed, their scents mingling with that of the spices and fabrics, the metals and plants of the stall-fronts. It was the exact place I had been searching out since leaving Deos.

Pity it took my current circumstances to find it.

We used what little credits had been allotted us from our supply caches, the only form of currency this place recognised, choosing to share amongst ourselves what anyone purchased. If the item could indeed be shared.

Farox had gone out of his way to find a stall that sold Torvian sweet powder, a mixture that once poured in a goblet would make the liquid turn purple. It fizzled on my tongue when I drank it.

Hentirion had sought out any stall that sold books, desperate for some kind of reading material, an item that the train sorely lacked. He offered to lend the one he procured to me once he had finished. **A History of Oltise.** Not that I'd ever been particularly interested in reading up on The Gods Hold, but the offer was there.

Emil and S'vara amused themselves on the stalls that sold what I could only call junk. String and rope caught S'vara's eye, something about needing more—I assumed to finish the net she'd been knotting.

Emil on the other hand found interest in the scrap metal stalls, a fan-like device made of steel caused his entire face to light up. Saska immediately passed over the credits to the merchant before Emil had even opened his mouth. He kissed him to shut it.

I found nothing of interest in the stalls except those that sold baked goods. I wasted several credits on them and felt quite satisfied I'd identified the ingredients in each one that I was

confident, should I find myself in possession of the ingredients, that I would be able to replicate them.

Tira let out a strangled gasp. When I looked over at her I found her bouncing on her hooves and pointing over to a dark blue tent set up in one of the smaller alcoves, the space no bigger than one of the train washrooms. Like every stall here, a tapestry hung above the entrances displaying their vocation or sales items of choice. This one, embroidered in gold, bore the mark of a Blessed.

"A Soulstitcher? Really Tira, surely you know how dangerous they can be," S'vara warned, her expression cautious as she gazed at the dark blue tent.

"Please," she pleaded, looking around at our faces. "Don't let me go alone." She clung to my hand in desperation, her doe eyes somehow even larger. "Fine. I'll come with you."

"I'll come too," Saska added, causing Tira to yip in excitement.

The others said they would stay close by and the three of us approached the tent.

We passed through what I initially thought was the entrance only to find ourselves inside another tent. A sign on the stone wall informed us that only if the white curtain was drawn could we enter. The curtain was blue.

While we waited, Tira continuing to bounce in anticipation, I spread out my senses wanting to be prepared in case what was on the other side of that curtain was not welcome. I sensed three individuals. Two men. Both human. The third was a Blessed with a scent I'd never encountered before. That must be the Soulstitcher.

I knew of them to be a Fabricant in nature, a Spindle said to be able to weave the threads of the human soul. My secret readings in my time at the Celestial Offices taught me they were once healers of the mind, but my Deogn scripture taught me they were to be feared. Blessed capable of twisting the mind and were trespassers upon the Dark Sphere. I'd been taught to fear them and report them should I ever encounter one.

The fact I felt at ease standing this close to one made my curiosity peak.

The tent flap opened, and the two men emerged. They halted for a moment when they saw us standing in the passageway, the larger of the two men's gazes lingering on me, on my hair as he passed through. A moment after they had departed a woman emerged.

She looked forty years perhaps, a ruddy complexion and hair even more so. She took one look at our collars and in Preat said, "Memory or pleasure?"

"Memory," chimed Saska and Tira at the same time.

*What did they know that I didn't?*

The woman turned her dark eyes on me, a gaze that felt too heavy for a stranger. I swallowed the lump in my throat before answering. "The same."

She bowed her head in acknowledgement and proceeded to lift the curtain for our entry.

A cave was the only way to explain the room. Limestone walls and floors, each step I took echoing back, a Bright-light nailed to the ceiling. The room had an odd golden glow to it, and there was a soft hum that filtered through from a set of curtains on the back wall. The space was bare except for the shelves where the source of the room's glow was situated.

Dozens upon dozens of jars sat on the shelves, grouped in a way that didn't seem quantifiable. No pattern in number or size. The only thing the jars had in common was the contents. Contained within each one was a single glowing thread, some brighter than others.

"Please sit."

We did as instructed, taking the chairs around the small table the Soulstitcher sat at.

"Do you know which memory it is you wish to traverse?" My companions both nodded. I did not.

"Very well," she said. "You two first. Paying with credits?" Saska once again handed over a heavy satchel covering the cost of all of them. Where he had obtained that many credits I did not deign to ask. Especially since our working theory on Saska's origin involved the corporate enterprises and at least one of the seven families of the Pazgari Covenant.

The woman accepted the payment and then placed both her palms upward on the table. "Think of that moment you wish to traverse and give me your hands."

Saska waited no time in placing his hand in the Soulstitcher's, the tattoos on his arm peeking out from under his shirt sleeve. Tira took a little longer. She closed her eyes for a minute and when that toothy smile of hers filled her face, she placed her hand in the woman's.

Pupils enlarging, the Soulstitcher's eyes turned a glassy white. They began to flit back and forth rapidly as if she were reading something inhumanly fast. Her blank expression morphed into something pleasant, and a soft smile fell upon her lips. "How wonderful they are."

Keeping my companions' hands in her, their eyes still closed, she rose from the table and led them through the dark drapes at the back of the cave. Unwilling to depart from their sides, considering the circumstances of the past few months, I followed.

This room *was* a cave. Unlike the previous space, the only light source here were the jars. Hundreds lined the edges of the cave, the golden glow rising up the walls to illuminate the cavern above. Cushions and blankets bundled in piles were scattered about the floor. A half dozen people lounging on them, eyes closed as they, like my companions traversed whatever memory she had called forth for them.

Saska and Tira were led to a vacant pile of cushions where they both lay down, Tira curling up into the cushions. Still holding their hands the woman said, "Once I release my hold on you, you will experience a full immersion into the memory at which point you will be able to relive it to your leisure. If at any point you wish to leave the memory, you need only open your eyes. Ready?"

They both nodded. A moment later she released their hands, and they slowly laid back.

The heat of the woman's stare caused me to remove my gaze from my bunkmates.

Looking up at me from the pile of cushions the woman bore a quizzical expression "Have you been ill child?" she asked, her eyes

still glazed over.

*Why would she ask me that?*

I told her no, but it seemed to dissatisfy her. "Injured perhaps?" She pointed to her head.

Again I told her no, at which point she invited me to join her on the cushions. "May I?" she said, indicating to my hands.

I hadn't requested any particular memory, let alone actually agreed to let her rifle through them so my hesitation was very apparent.

She relaxed her hands into her lap, but continued to retain those white eyes. "You are aware of what I can do, what I can see with these eyes?"

When I silently nodded, she continued. "Human soul threads are white. Tainted are silver. You my dear have neither."

"Why would that be?"

She offered her hand to me again. "Should we find out?"

I gave her my hands, though I didn't close my eyes. My nature wouldn't allow it of me.

Her eyes began to flitter back and forth. "Fascinating."

"What is?"

She blinked and her eyes returned to normal. "My dear," she addressed me, patting my hand in hers. "Have you ever considered the possibility that your memories are not your own?"



During the hour in which I waited for Saksa and Tira to wake up, unwilling to leave their sides, my mind continued to replay my conversation with the Soulstitcher. I knew there was only one possibility as to the cause of her words, the source of the possible manipulation of my memories. But which memories—the thought was too great, too devastating to fathom.



The rest of the afternoon was spent in a kind of haze, following my companions from stall to stall, conflicted about how I felt knowing they were able to experience a joyous memory and I was troubled with the thought mine might not even be my own.

I'd been so preoccupied in those thoughts that I hadn't noticed daylight no longer shone into the town. Instead, across every gap, of each alley and passageway were lanterns. These giant embers floated on the air like a thousand fireflies, bringing warmth and light where only darkness once ventured.

Still clinging to my hand as she had done since leaving the Soulstitcher's tent, still thriving off the joy of reliving her memories, Tira pulled me at a running pace through the passages, excited by the prospect of the large lantern that was said to be hanging over the centre of town.

Several minutes later, after weaving in and out of the alleyways, we found ourselves standing in a cavernous concourse. Overhead, made of some type of red fibrous material was a lantern the size of a small boat, the paper almost as crimson as my dress. Below scattered around the walls were more stalls, the scent of exotic foods filling my nose and making my stomach grumble. And in the centre, directly below the lantern were couples dancing.

Tira gushed when she saw the dance floor, begging us to join her as we crossed the space. Hentirion offered his hand to S'vara who mockingly curtsied in acceptance. Saska who looked as willing to dance as a pile of horse manure allowed Emil to lead him onto the dance floor, their embrace intimate. That only left Farox, Tira and myself. However considering the terror on the young girl's face at the prospect of being denied a dance, I encouraged the two to take the floor.

Farox offered his hand to Tira, an offer she accepted with glee. Before taking to the dance floor, he paused by my ear. "I might be mistaken, but I believe that man over there is your husband. Perhaps now is the time to see you in that dress."

Though I had not admitted it aloud, the idea of garnering a reaction out of Rhydian in this dress had been part of the reason I had agreed to wear it in the first place. The bodice was tight and

form-fitting, and the skirt whilst encompassing several layers, was thin and airy. It was unusual compared to my normal attire, but it was comfortable. And after spending a year wearing clothes I hadn't picked for myself, wearing something that I actually liked on my body was satisfying.

The Runners all congregated around a table by the wall, the scent of alcohol in the air, several large glasses already in some hands. I recognised Filora amongst them. She was the first to notice I hadn't moved from the edge of the dance floor, and the first to notice where my attention lay.

If it were not for his scent, I would not have recognised Rhydian. Handsome was too simple a compliment. Beautiful, exquisite, delectable. Ravishing. Too many words came to mind as I admired him in those crimson pants, and the way the black shirt hugged his broad shoulders beneath the matching crimson vest. I pitied the Nomen he likely stole them from. They would never have done the garments justice. Even his hair, which he'd worn in a bun, was beyond expectation. A single strand hung down his brow as if placed there by a god to tempt me to pull his hair loose and run my fingers through those thick waves.

Filora made the gesture for my name, a Seja word I'd only recently learned, and Rhydian turned, the pin securing his bun glinting in the light of the lantern.

For a split second, Rhydian's control over his blessing lapsed and I heard his heart rate quicken when he looked at me.

Chaos and serenity coexisting in a single expression.

No sooner had the lapse occurred did Rhydian's calm control return and he closed the distance between us. The moment he touched me, sweeping me into his arms, pressing my body to his, I was reminded why I hesitated to come in the first place.

I was losing the bet.

***"If I said I wanted to tear that dress off your body, would you let me?"*** My breathing trembled as his lips caressed the curve of my ear.

Gods it was infuriating how he'd managed to find so many of my weaknesses when I'd only managed to find one of his.

I leaned forward ensuring that the waves of my hair brushed against his cheek, the long black and white locks hanging entirely unfastened down my back. Close enough to taste his scent, I whispered in his ear. "You should ask your wife to dance if you ever want that to be a possibility." I made sure to kiss his lobe before pulling away.

Desire scented the air as Rhydian cleared his throat.

Keeping his hand on my back he led me to the dance floor as his inner voice growled in vexation. ***"You delight in this particular form of torture."***

*"I delight in knowing that my presence excites you,"* I informed him as his hand methodically drew a line down my spine where it finally forced the gap between our bodies to vanish. My body moulded into his and for a moment, I imagined us in this position entirely naked and I felt myself grow wet. The thought caused an involuntary moan to escape me.

Rhydian laughed. Soft and genuine that my heart betrayed me and fucking fluttered.

*"What?"* I asked, looking up into those arrogant eyes.

***"I may not be a mind reader, but even I can tell you're thinking about me naked."***

I fumbled a step, forcing Rhydian to catch me. It caused an even more amused expression to become etched into his features as he helped me back to my feet, the skin tingling where his hand touched. I remained indignantly silent.

***"Just admit it, Rieka."*** He let his thumb linger just above the back of my dress, just enough I could feel the ghost of its touch. ***"You're struggling with this just as much as I am. Don't you think it's time we make up for missed opportunities?"***

I forced us to a standstill, gripping his arm as if it would somehow stop him from moving without my permission. *"Missed opportunities?"*

***"Must I spell it out for you?"*** He furrowed his brow. When I didn't respond he said quite directly, ***"Sex Rieka. I would really like to have sex with you."***

*But Keltjar. That night. Didn't we sleep together?* A single brow raised as if he had actually read my mind. **"Oh, that night. We slept together yes but we didn't have sex."**

*"But you were naked in my bed?"*

The expression on his face turned to one of honest confusion, as did his scent. **"Rieka, do you still not remember that night?"** I felt his grip on my hand slacken as if to release it, but for some unfathomable reason, I tightened mine.

*"We were drinking,"* I recalled that much.

**"We were,"** he replied casually as he led me into a spin before dipping me.

I grabbed his shirt to stop him from doing it again. *"Rhydian Kanyk, did we or did we not sleep together in Keltjar?"*

**"Much to my eternal disappointment,"** Rhydian said as he brushed a lock of hair behind my ear. **"We did not."**

The song ended and the musicians began playing a slower tune, one that had Rhydian pulling my body closer into his, his hand slowly coming to rest on my lower back.

*"So then why were we naked? Because I distinctly recall waking up to the sight of your naked ass in my bed?"*

He gave me the smallest of smirks. It made me almost miss the clean shave. Those dimples...

**"You invited me up to your room and demanded I strip tease for you."**

My eyes widened in shock. *"Please tell me you're joking?"*

The smirk became a smug smile. **"I believe your exact words were, 'I demand you remove your attire so that I might admire that magnificent cock beneath those too-tight trousers.'"**

The memory flashed in my mind the moment he said the words.

Mortified did not begin to define how I felt.

As Rhydian spoke his next words, I felt the comforting touch of his hand as he cupped the back of my head. **"Then you kissed me."**

My expression clearly showed my recognition of that fact because he then said with a smirk, **"Oh, so you do remember that. Well**

***after you kissed me, several times between the dining room and your room—"***

*"Now you're just rubbing it in..."*

***"Then...I noticed that you had a fever—which I did eventually realise was because Brute bodies can't always metabolise alcohol like other Devos—I used my blessing to get sober. I thought that man—Leon I think you called him—I thought he had spiked your drink with something but when I went to confront him, he was too drunk to function after the lashing you gave him."***

*"You think Leon spiked my drink? Not likely. He loves me too much to hurt me."*

Rhydian's scent shifted slightly. His eyes darkened. ***"Loves you. Present tense."***

I bit my lip to see his reaction. His eyes immediately lowered to my mouth. *"He still did when we saw him in Keltjar,"* I admitted with a smile.

Rhydian hmped under his breath. Very uncharacteristic of him.

*Is he jealous?*

It was a ridiculous thought. It certainly helped in achieving my goals, but Rhydian had proved himself to be a rational man. Jealousy was not something he'd ever indulge in.

*"So, if I understand correctly, we got naked and were about to sleep together, then I got sick and you being the gentleman that you are, decided to keep me warm with your naked body?"*

Rhydian moved his face closer to mine, so close that I could taste the mint on my tongue. ***"I'm not sure if you know this, but, bodies get warmer faster when they're skin to skin."***

I pursed my lips to keep from smiling. *"Really?"*

***"Especially if those two bodies are naked."***

Then I did something I probably shouldn't have.

I kissed him.

I could say I did it because it was part of my plan to seduce him. A part of the same plan that had me agreeing to wear this beautiful dress for the exact purpose of enticing him to tear it off my body. A

way to make him crave more of me than I was willing to give. But it would have been a lie.

I hated this man. But I wanted him more than I hated him.

He took my breath away. I was so damn breathless I didn't want to breathe so long as his lips were on mine.

"Get a room!" someone shouted, the sudden attention drawing the two of us apart.

*"Do you have one?"* The words left me before I could stop them. But now that I had said them I didn't want to take them back.

Rhydian's gaze was downcast, his eyes scrutinising my face, presumably because of what I'd just said.

I swallowed and glanced down. I was holding his hand. The one with the marriage band. *"We started this bet on unequal footing, I would like to remedy that."*

I gazed into those ocean-blue eyes, chaos rumbling within them. *"Or are you going to reject your wife?"*

A second, a breath later and he'd drawn me into a hard and fast kiss. And once again I did not care if I ever breathed again.

***"I'll meet you there,"*** his inner voice promised as his own was caught in his throat, his breathing ragged. ***"I've got to make excuses for why I'm not attending my own party. Ten minutes. And leave the dress on."***

He fixed me with a stare. ***"So that I might admire those magnificent tits as you take it off."***

Five minutes later having followed Rhydian's instructions, I stood in the middle of what could only be called an apartment. A cave that had been altered in such a way that regardless of the dark stone walls, it was homely.

There was a kitchen off to the right, a round dining table with a dozen chairs. The circular chaise lounge, draped in heavy blankets and stuffed with cushions sat in the middle of the room whilst further back, secluded by shadow was a large timber framed bed.

I wandered through, careful not to move anything but unable to stop myself from touching. When I reached the bed I caressed the blanket draped across the corner. The fabric was the softest velvet

I'd ever encountered. The thought of wrapping myself in it was extremely enticing, especially since it smelled like him.

Pine and earth. Perhaps I could convince Rhydian to bring it back to the bunks?

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I stared out at the room. It felt warm. Nothing had felt like that since I'd lived under my parents' roof.

How often did Rhydian visit this place when he wasn't on the train, did he consider it his home? Would he have told me about it if not for my invitation?

My gaze was drawn to something metallic glinting in the centre of the room. Rhydian must have been here earlier because there was already a Kindling Orb activated, the room warm from the heat emanating from the metal sphere.

As I approached the orb on the tea table where it sat before the chaise, I noticed more of Rhydian's sketches scattered across the table's surface. But unlike those on the train, these had only one subject.

In breathtaking delineation, Rhydian had captured my likeness. Dozen upon dozens of charcoal sketches of me.

He could not have done all these today, surely not. Unless...

*Was this where he was coming all those weeks before Old Kings Town?*

I'd never considered myself a beautiful woman, attractive—yes. I knew that I was appealing to men, and I used whatever part of me that attracted them to my advantage. But beautiful was a word I associated with my mother and her soft delicate features. I'd always thought my own harsh and angular. More severe than what a *beautiful* woman ought to be. I picked up the one closest to me. My hair was braided over my shoulder and I was laughing.

*When had he seen me laughing like that?*

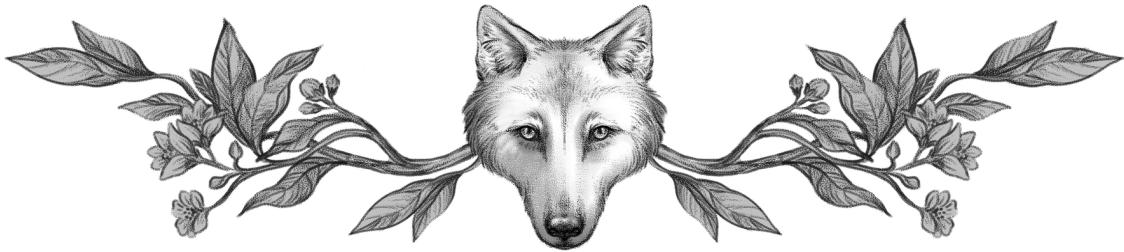
The way Rhydian had drawn me, I'd never seen myself that way. I was almost—radiant.

There knock on the door.

*Rhydian!*

His name left my lips the moment I swung open the door. But it wasn't Rhydian who greeted me. My instinct kicked in a moment too late. By the time I realised the two men standing in the doorway were the same two men from the Soulstitcher tent, my muscles locked, my stomach cramped, and pain ripped through me like a thousand razors before my world turned black.





## RIEKA

Freshly fried meat sizzled, the smoked smell salting the air. My stomach growled begrudgingly as a reminder I hadn't yet eaten dinner.

But food was not what greeted me when I opened my eyes.

A burning corpse lay feet away, the skin blackened and cracking. A chorus of cheers ripped violently at my eardrums as I snapped into a sitting position.

The dirt floor of a cave was beneath me, the white limestone walls around me spattered with dark charred lines as if struck by a burning whip. Wide arched windows cut out of the walls several feet from the ground were filled with shouting spectators.

Spectators of an arena.

I was in a Fiend Pit.

The concept of forcing wild creatures to fight to the death for entertainment was already considered barbaric in Deos, but the fact those creatures were made by Organics through the process of Bio-Architecture, creatures considered unnatural to the natural world created by the gods was tantamount to sacrilege, a crime that constituted immediate Sundering. Fiends were all but extinct in Deos, culled in the name of the Celestials. The last sighting west of

the Erania Range had been over fifty years ago in an arena very much like this one.

My instinct told me to reach for my boot. But about halfway down my leg I remembered I'd chosen to wear nice shoes instead of practical ones. Etrina was still in my boot. On the train.

*Gods damn it!*

Slowly I rose to my feet, my dress disturbing the dust on the floor. Eager and curious faces stared down at me, contempt and something akin to frenetic excitement oozed down from the galleries.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a voice announced over a speaker system. "For the finale, on the left I present to you our female fighter."

Holding a long slender silver baton to his throat, and pointing a gnarled hand in my direction was one of the stocky men from the Soulstitcher tent. "And to our right our reigning champion. Now who said they've never seen two Kanahari fight before."

I spun around at the pitmaster's words, desperate to see exactly who he expected me to fight. A tall figure by the opposite wall, wings outstretched turned around, his focus on his hands as he attempted to wrap them.

*"Taren!"*

The Talon stilled his movements. Slowly, brown eyes rose to meet mine. The moment he saw me, the bindings fell from his grip.

My feet were faster than I expected. But so was the pitmaster's reaction. No sooner had I crossed the halfway point of the pit was I whipped back across the dirt by the collar around my neck. An electric blue tether shimmered in the air above me.

"Looks like someone is a little too eager for a fight. Bets up!" he shouted.

I rose back to my feet, ignoring the pitmaster's excuse for humour and returned my attention to Taren.

**"Rieka are you hurt?"** Taren's inner voice called out. He'd stretched himself to the limit of his collar, the same blue tether stretching out behind him and into a plate in the far wall.

*They'd collared him.*

A small part of me had hoped that he had escaped before they had put that on him. But I saw the scabbed skin around his neck, the extreme chaffing. He'd been here a while. Taren saw what held my focus and a sad smile rose to his chapped lips. ***"I see neither of us managed to escape."***

*They cut his hair.*

Kanahari culturally grow their hair long for warmth, but the quality of ones hair also serves as an indication for health. And Taren had such beautiful hair. It was now no longer than Rhydian's but it was far too short for him to bear his tribal colours. I could not see the purple-dyed strip of hide anywhere on his person.

*"How did you get here?"*

Taren turned and picked up his bindings, making a choice to return to wrapping his hands. ***"I was not a good fit for their Sky Hawk program. Being Kanahari made me useless in their eyes. These wonderful gentlemen thought I was better suited here."***

*"You won't fight for others,"* I said in realisation. Kanahari pacifism permits violence only under one condition.

He nodded. ***"They bet on the fact I would fight to defend my own life."***

*"They want us to fight one another?"*

Taren shook his head. ***"I will not fight you Rieka."***

*"And yet you strap your hands?"*

His expression told me I'd wounded him. "It is not you I do this for now."

A gong was struck and from over the edge of one of the empty windows something large was thrown in. I'd had no time to think. The creature charged me and Taren ordered me to get down. I ducked just in time for Taren to fly straight over me. A horrible scream ripped from the creature's throat. Blood peppered the air. When I looked over, Taren's bare feet were covered in blood having just torn through its chest with his talons.

Taren prayed over the body as the crowd cheered in excitement of the creatures slaughter. When I approached it, I realised it wasn't

just any creature. Half in transition, nails long, hair matted—this was a Rabid.

From inside the gallery I saw another Rabid being moved into place to be thrown into the pit. Taren was already preparing himself for the next kill he was to make, moving into a position where he could defend me if he needed to.

A fire roiled inside my veins. We were nothing but entertainment to these people, pets and animals used for sport. Had they nothing better to do with their time than spend in on betting which of us would outlive the other?

Fear is what drove these people. They feared us and what we could do. But more than anything they feared their gods.

But perhaps any god would do.

I knew what I needed to do next. And I knew what it would take out of me. Besspelling them was out of the question. There was no telling what they would do to me or to Taren if I failed. This was my only choice. I'd never done it to more than a few people at a time, never forced them to see things as I wished. But I refused to be what they wanted me to be and I refused to be scared of them.

I took a step forward drawing Taren's gaze, ignoring him when he urged me to stop, and I growled at the spectators. The sound reverberated off the walls so loudly that the women in the gallery screamed in terror, the pitmaster dropped his baton in shock before looking down at me from his little hole in the wall.

I exhaled calmly when I had his attention and silence had fallen on the arena.

"Someone wants to talk to you!"

I let the confusion knit his brows for only a few seconds, long enough for me to force myself into their minds. Into all their minds.

The spectral I created appeared before them in the blink of an eye. Robes of black adorned his eight-foot frame, curls of pale blond bounced off broad shoulders as golden eyes studied the crowd in apt boredom.

He was perfect. Identical to the real thing.

The spectral turned and found the pitmaster, fixing him with his gaze.

With a voice I knew as well as my own I let the spectral speak, though his lips remained unmoving.

*"You have something of mine."* The voice drawled in their heads melodically, causing several women to immediately faint. It's not every day one gets to speak to a god.

The spectral moved closer towards the pitmaster's window, his size increasing the closer he got until he stood at face level with the cowering man. My hands started to shake so I fisted them in my skirts to hide them from view.

*"The girl is mine. You have no right to take her."*

"We didn't know," the pitmaster said, his voice quivering as the spectators around him fled for the walls but not the arena, every one of them too scared to look away. "We'll release her," he replied, keeping his eyes locked on the golden ones.

*"Yes, you will."* The god spectral leaned in so that his face was inches from the pitmasters. *"You will do anything she asks of you. Treat her words as my words. Do you understand me?"*

The pitmaster nodded.

*"DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME!"*

The scent of piss saturated the air.

The pitmaster fell to his knees, his face white, his pants wet. "Yes, Divine One."

The god spectral smiled, and I had to look away.

*"Good human."*

Then I released them all. The god vanished and I staggered right into Taren's arms. When I gazed up at him, realisation had settled on his features. He knew I'd done it.

Silence lay heavy on the arena as the spectators stood frozen, terrified by the thought that they had been moments from death. Fear, and terror, piss, tears, puke. There was nothing quite like the stench of the presence of a god.

***"Rieka?"***

My gaze shot up into the gallery where only now a whisp of pine permeated the rest. I saw a stranger staring down at me, an expression on his face I couldn't quite place. But his eyes.

*"Rhydian."*

"Someone get her out of there!" shouted the pitmaster. His words sent the arena into a frenzy. Spectators fled, screaming and running for the exits. No one wanted to stay where a god had declared his anger.

Two men jumped into the pit, one to the wall and the other to me. He hesitated when he saw Taren wasn't moving from my side. Cautiously, the man pulled a tech piece from his pocket and held it to my collar and then turned his attention to the man at the wall, a similar tech piece in his hand. They pressed a button on their respective devices at the same time. The blue tether rippled in the air, then shot off from my collar and into the wall.

"And his." I indicated to Taren.

The two men hesitated, looking to their boss for answers, only for the pale man to nod his approval.

The man moved to Taren. "Now," I said with as much authority as my shaking body could muster. "Remove his collar."

"Do it," the pitmaster ordered.

Within a few minutes Taren's collar had departed his neck for the pocket of the man who removed it, the marks left behind making me wish I kept my golden-eyed spectral around a minute longer.

"Now mine."

I could feel the heat of Rhydian's eyes watching me from the gallery, his shadowed figure emerging from the dark to watch as the man approached me.

He targeted my collar with the device.

Nothing happened.

He did it again, and again until sweat started to drip down his brow and he frantically kept looking over his shoulder at his boss.

The pitmaster frustrated, jumped down from the gallery. He kept his distance from Taren, his knuckles turning white as he tightened his grip on the silver baton in his hand and approached me.

"I can't do it, sir." The device beeped loudly as if in agreement.

Their boss snatched the device and attempted it himself. From the gallery, Rhydian leaned against the arch of the window.

I returned my attention to the pitmaster, his own brow knitting in frustration until he too began to sweat in fear.

I tried to remain calm. "What is the matter?"

He smacked the device against the inside of his palm a few times and tried using it again, only to have the same result. The device beeped in objection.

"I can't release it. There is some sort of lock code on it." He touched a button on the device and like the techboard at the slave camp, an image was projected on the air. My stomach seemed to want to crawl out of my throat.

Rotating inside a set of consecutive circles were dozens of glowing blue patterns — characters of a language I have known since birth.

It wasn't a code. It was Gods' Tongue.

Dirt shuffled underfoot. I glanced back up at Rhydian and found him departing from the window.

"A code like this," the pitmaster added. "Only the manufacturer would have the key code."

I let a rumble rise to my throat. The pitmaster staggered back under my gaze. I knew he was right, but it still pissed me off.

I closed the distance between us once more, keeping my voice low. "My Divine One will be displeased. It's probably best you flee this place and never return; he's not known to be forgiving." I then paused, another thought occurring to me.

The pitmaster swallowed hard as I closed the gap between us.

For a human, he was larger than most, but under fear of divine anger, he was no taller than a child. I leaned in, my lips close to his ear. "However many others you've got fighting here, collared or chained in a cell, if I were you, I'd release them too. Who knows who they belong to?"

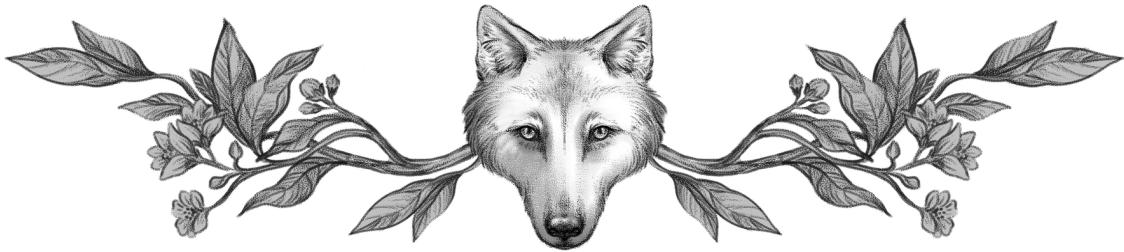
Ten minutes later, Taren and I found ourselves in an alley, the door we'd walked through slammed shut behind us.

"What now?" Taren asked.

Fragrant pine and wet soil drifted down the alleyway. I spun around and found Rhydian leaning on the alley wall fiddling with the band around his wrist. The leather of the jacket glistened blood red in the amber glow of the Kindling fires that mounted the stone above him.

I moved to approach him, only for Rhydian himself to push off the wall, the stench of anger tainting our reunion. "The train arrives in fifteen minutes. We need to be on it."





## RIEKA

Hate was such a weak word. I hated sugar-coated sweet nuts, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't eat them if someone offered them to me. Hate was Dislike's cousin. You know his name, you know his occupation, and you even invite him to soirees because it's the polite thing to do. Because Hate was a tolerable emotion.

I didn't hate Rhydian Kanyk.

I loathed him. Viscerally. The ego of the man. He dared to be angry with me for taking the opportunity to free myself.

He made me leave Taren on the platform. No explanation, no chance to say goodbye. Just left him.

Taren had asked me if I trusted them, Filora and the other Runners in Lantern Town. And of course, I said yes. Because *they* had given me no reason not to trust them.

Rhydian had taken Taren's acceptance of his situation as cause to then order me back onto the train. And I'd done it. Me.

*I'm a fucking idiot.*

I'm standing with my dress gripped tightly in my fists, water up to my ankles, *The Bathhouse* empty save for a very naked Rhydian and myself, and all I could think about was how could he be mad at me when he'd do the exact same thing given the chance.

*We were selfish creatures after all.*

"Rieka, will you get in the water please!" His tone was flat. Even with his blessing controlling his blood pressure, I could still smell it on him.

"Why did you make Taren stay?"

He waded towards me through the water. "Did you want him to be a prisoner again?"

A growl rose in my throat. Of course, I didn't want my friend to be a prisoner. I snapped back. "What kind of question is that?"

"One that needed asking apparently." He scoffed as he pulled the pin from his hair and tossed it to the pool ledge. "Get in the water Rieka, you're covered in their blood."

"You have no right to be mad at me!"

"I am not mad," he pointedly replied when he waded closer.

"Yes you are," I insisted. "You're mad I tried to get them to take the collar off," I replied through gritted teeth.

"I'm not mad about that."

"Rhydian you reek of anger."

His scent immediately spiked, his inner voice furious. ***"Because you used your taint to impersonate a dead god in front of three hundred Kensillans. Do you realise the danger you may have put yourself in!"***

My entire body fought the desire to run. Rhydian knew. He'd seen my spectral, and he knew who it was, or he'd guessed—either way Rhydian knew.

My hands fisted in the fabric of my dress, and I marched down the pool steps, fury fuelling me. "I'd do it again if it meant I could save someone I cared about."

Finally unable to hold his composure he shouted in frustration. "All that is steady, Rieka will you get in the godsdamned water before I drag you in."

I stared him down. "Make me."

His eyes darkened. "If you wish it!"

Rhydian moved swiftly, closing the distance between us in three short strides. Still a head taller than me even standing on the lower step, he scooped me up in one single move, flung me over his shoulder and descended back into the bath.

Then as if I weighed absolutely nothing, he threw me into the water.

The weight of my dress weighed me down, the world above me, ripples of blue and brown. In my frustration at being thrown in and unable to move, I pulled the dress off, letting it sink to the bottom of the pool.

I rose from the water ready to unleash my anger on that infuriating man, but my body stilled. Rhydian stood no more than a foot away from me, the former fury which had contorted his face had vanished. His gaze was as intense as his scent. Lust and desire permeated the air between us.

His eyes dropped to my chest, to the undergarment I wore. The one he'd traded his sister for. The fabric clung to me, a second skin of pearlescent silk that felt see-through under his gaze.

My body betrayed me and I slid a hand up his chest, my fingers trespassing onto his tattoo. My voice escaped me in a whisper. "I fucking hate you."

Beneath the water, his hands clawed at my hips. "I know you do."

Our lips collided in a fit of wanton destruction. There was barely a breath shared between us as he lifted me up by my ass so I could wrap my legs around him. A trail of desperate kisses made their way down my neck coming to a stop at my breasts.

Rhydian sucked at the flesh so slowly that my entire body trembled at the sensation.

I took his head in my hands, dragging his lips back to mine where he devoured them.

His scent was intoxicating. Raw earth, the scent of power, of strength. It was all-consuming. A landslide. I didn't care if it buried me.

My back hit something hard and a pained moan rushed from my lips, only to be caught in another of his kisses. I opened my eyes and found we were under the walk bridge, the metal shielding us overhead.

Keeping my legs wrapped around him, I raised a hand to cling to the metal above for support as my back pressed into the pylon. A moment later Rhydian released his hold on me and forced a startled

gasp from my lips when he ripped open the silk between my legs, the stitches snapping in time with the seam that tethered my soul to my body, fraying with every breath I took. Then he slid his fingers inside my wet, throbbing pussy, and I didn't recognise the noise that escaped me.

Visceral. And hungry.

He smiled into the kiss as he claimed my lips. By the time his fingers had finished, I was nothing but raw energy. I was dough in his hands.

"Rhydian, I want you inside me," I begged, drawing another kiss from his lips.

Slowly, he guided his beautiful cock inside me, the length so unbelievably perfect that had I not hated them, I would have thanked the gods for its creation.

Rhydian braced his hands on my hips, and he thrust. Hard and fast, he struck me to my core, whipping away any sense of calm I had clung to. My body hummed under his touch. The nerves roiling under my skin.

I wanted more.

*"Don't stop,"* my inner voice pleaded. So he obliged.

Rhydian's thrusts quickened their pace, building the ache inside of me until I could barely remember my own name.

Boots colliding with metal sounded above me, and I dared to look up. But he kissed me again. First to distract me, and then to silence my cries of pleasure. Footsteps passed over the bridge and Rhydian timed every thrust in harmony.

He took me further into that state of ecstasy until I could no longer tell where I ended and he began. A name, whispered from soft lips, the sound tickling my cheek.

***"Rieka."***

The dam in me burst, the sensation rippling through my body, igniting every cell, every fibre of my being until I collapsed into Rhydian's arms, my body no longer mine.

*Gods this is bad.*

Rhydian Kanyk had unravelled me. Every nerve, every cell, every breath of my being had been utterly and irrevocably undone by this

man.

And he could never know.



I shouldn't have made the cake.

Which was a ridiculous notion since I'd intended to make Rhydian fall in love with me. A goal which I was certain, especially after our tryst in *The Bathhouse*, I was well on my way to achieving. The cake had simply been a calculated part of my decision.

Only now I found myself wondering if Rhydian liked other pastries. Did he like apples in his cakes, did he like cream on his sweet buns, why, when he hated strawberries, had he eaten the strawberry pie in Keltjar?

I was not that person. I had never been that person. I used men to achieve my goals. I wasn't proud of it, but it didn't keep me up at night.

He did.

Thoughts of Rhydian kept me up long into the night that I would watch him sleep just to make sure he wasn't a figment of my imagination.

The issue was, whilst I didn't want my feelings to develop further, I needed his to. I needed to spend time with him to learn why he had made the deal to sell me. I needed to learn who the buyer was if I was ever going to escape whatever deal Rhydian had made. And that was only possible by spending time with him. So as much as I didn't want to, I forced myself to welcome his company.

In the mornings, Rhydian had made a habit of waking up with me and escorting me to *The Fight Hall*. Like he was some Devout suitor accompanying me to the assembly rooms on my morning promenade. During rounds, he always seemed to be in Lily's room

when Sal did her daily check-up on the pregnancy. And at night, even though I'd met his second condition, we still sparred.

Then after we'd thrown one another across the mat, our bodies aching and sweating from the rigorous exercise. The result was always the same. The two of us in some barely private alcove or vacated washroom, my legs wrapped around his waist, his hands gripping onto me for dear life as he respectfully railed me into oblivion.

Afterward, we would walk back to his office where he would fill his tub and watch me bathe. I would soak and he would sketch. Sometimes passengers, sometimes me, sketches like the ones in his apartment in Lantern Town that we hadn't talked about yet. And if he felt inclined, I would let him ask me questions. I didn't always answer them, but he never pressed the issue. It wasn't until I was drawn for another Hunt that I started to have genuine questions of my own.

It happened a week after the fight pit, Rhydian had insisted on running with me but had been refused by the council, so Mal and Anika had volunteered to accompany me. And the fact it was me and only me that they helped hadn't gone unnoticed.

When I'd voiced the question to Rhydian, after returning unscathed, he'd informed me that the Runners considered me one of them. But when I'd asked him why the council had refused his leave of the train, he'd said it was because of me.

I pressed further, "Because I'm your wife or another reason?"

His hand had paused then, the charcoal coating his fingers like a Kindling after a burn. He looked up at me from his position on his sofa. "Another reason."

"Does this reason have anything to do with why you intend to sell me to the buyer?"

"No."

I didn't press the issue further. But a week later, the two of us once again in his office, him sketching, me bathing, another question that had been brewing on my mind since Lantern Town sprang from my lips.

"How did you find me that night in the pit?"

It was black ink that coated his hands tonight. They halted their motion once again at my question. "You wish to know if I tracked you?"

I swallowed and leaned against the edge of the tub, my arms resting under my chin. "Did you?"

He had placed down his paper and quill and walked over to his desk. I scented my blood the moment he opened the drawer. When he returned, he walked over to the tub and presented me with the arrowhead from my first Hunt. He didn't stop me when I took it from his hand. The blood appeared to have crystalised where it coated the blades. Crimson crystal on black steel.

"And have you used it for anything else besides tracking me?" He understood my insinuation. I wanted to know if he had done to my blood what the captain from the garrison had done to his, the memory walking a piece of his blessing that he'd divulged to me since the incident.

Without hesitation, he said, "No."

I had stared at the arrowhead and contemplated dropping it in the bath, ridding him of the opportunity to learn my past. But instead, I handed it back to him.

Rhydian had taken the action exactly as I'd intended. He thought I trusted him with my life.

I couldn't have been more obvious where my feelings for him were. Even if I had no intention of admitting them, I expected him to.

But after two weeks of us spending every waking moment together, myself acting like a lovesick woman, I was still without a confession.

And it only exacerbated my own issues.

Rhydian Kanyk had invaded my thoughts, and he would not leave.

During a baking lesson when I was supposed to be focused on measuring the right amount of sugar in a recipe, I found myself reminded of the way his body had felt against mine, how distinct the contours of his stomach were under my fingertips, the shape of his muscles so perfectly defined. That incident had resulted in a sprinkle of sugar becoming syrup.

It was an actual miracle that I was still sane after a month of skirting around the issue of my... feelings. I'd grown so focused on my pursuit of Rhydian that I'd failed to notice the changes in my bunkmates.

Sometime during the month since Lantern Town, the boy from the talent show had started courting Tira. According to Farox, Fray as he was called danced with her all evening and brought her flowers from the nursery the following morning to ask her to court, flowers she promptly ate in delight.

I hadn't noticed that S'vara wasn't sleeping in her bunk anymore since I spent most nights on the floor of Rhydian's office. That net she'd been making, S'vara had strung it across the gap between the two sets of bunks and had been sleeping in there every night. She even started making some for the other passengers. Her trade item she called it.

As it turned out, I was the last person to know that the project Emil had been working on for weeks—with the copper wiring and the steel fan he'd purchased in Lantern Town—had all been components of a pair of wings he'd been constructing. It wasn't hard to guess who he was building those for.

In all honesty, I shouldn't have cared. My goal was freedom. My freedom. What happened in the lives of my bunkmates shouldn't be my concern, Rhydian should be. Yet I found myself craving the time I'd spent with them—eating with Emil and Hentirion in *The Mess Hall* discussing history, sparring with Saska and learning his knife techniques, walking the trade market with Tira and S'vara. I'd even missed playing drinking games with Farox in *The Cantina*.

"*War makes brothers out of strangers,*" my father used to say. I'd never believed him until now.

So for my own sanity, I decided I would not make Rhydian my focus. Marian 1<sup>st</sup> was still months away. My freedom could very well be obtained another way. Perhaps even my bunkmates might hold the key. I may have feelings for the man, but that didn't mean I had to make my world revolve around him. The next decision I made was entirely for me. I started attending Hentirion's classes with Tira.



I'd never actually been permitted to attend day school in Deos on account of my family's status as Military Caste. I'd learned to read and write from the Education Packages the Celestial Offices sent to the Burrough families, and since my mother had been the daughter of two members of the Scholar caste, she'd taught me history. It was because of her that I was able to pick up languages so fast. To actually be able to participate in real school classes had become the highlight of my day. And I wasn't the only adult in attendance.

Kosha and a few of the council members had started attending, often adding their own piece of historical knowledge to the class at the invitation of their invested teacher.

Saska on occasion attended, to become more fluent in Prean he'd informed me nonchalantly one afternoon. As if one handsome Deogn artist who shared his bed every evening hadn't been the obvious reason.

But in attending the classes I began to notice a change fall over the train.

Death was a common occurrence here. What wasn't common was child deaths. The entire train considered children their greatest possession. Regardless of the marks the children all wore on their hands, every child was looked out for, cared for and fed by every single passenger on board. So when one died, it wasn't just their parents who mourned, it was the entire train. During my last Hunt another child had fallen ill and the day after, their spirit was claimed.

Two more children died since, all with the same symptoms as the twins I'd seen Sal tend to all those weeks ago.

After their deaths, Sal had turned to her medicines and tonics, spending every free moment she had tending to her plants in *The Greenhouse* and the only person who could call her out of it was still banished from the train.

Sal became so focused on finding a cure that she sent me on all the rounds that didn't require her attendance. Those visits were the only reason I knew the children had started going missing.

Hentirion had been the first to bring it to my attention. He was an abnormally cheery man by nature, but had grown increasingly frustrated by the parents suddenly taking all their children out of his

classes. When he'd finally decided to visit each family one by one to learn why, believing himself the reason for their absences, he found all those children were sick too.

I was intent on checking up on the children during my rounds with Sal after that point. I'd been with her when the other children had been sick, so I already knew what symptoms to look out for. Fatigue, absentmindedness, lack of appetite followed by an inability to wake from sleep, and then eventually death. And all within a timeframe of a week.

But when I visited the families the day after, some of those children were gone. Not dead, gone. Missing. It happened every few days. Hentirion would tell me one of his students hadn't come to class, I'd check up on the family during rounds with Sal, and then a day or so later, they would be gone, and no one was talking about it.

I kept track. Fifty children had disappeared since my first rounds with Sal. How could fifty children just disappear and no one asked any questions?

The final straw occurred exactly a month after Lantern Town when I learned Ghena hadn't come to class. I'd rushed to visit her guardian, a woman in her sixties whom she called Biba, and found the seven-year-old had fallen sick. I'd been on my way to Rhydian's office hoping he would be the one to help me figure this out when I learned of the trial going on in the Council Chambers.

I had to push my way through the council hall just to reach the gallery stairwell. Every balcony of the gallery was full, as though every passenger on the train had arrived to watch.

Finally managing to find a gap on the second-floor balcony, I studied the scene. Tira stood on the edge of the council circle clinging to Farox, tears streaming down her face. Every council member sat in session. Standing in the space at the centre of the table, with his head hung low stood Frey, the young boy who had been courting Tira. Standing beside him with a busted lip was Saska. Anguished twisted knots formed in my stomach as I listened to the councillor's discussion.

Frey had attacked Saska during a sparing session.

He'd used his taint.

To obtain Saska's collar.

That was impossible. I'd seen the boy. He wasn't entirely harmless as a Kindling, and he was one of the Collarless. He'd been training with us every morning to prepare to take his oath to be a Runner when he turned sixteen next month.

My stomach twisted tighter.

Frey was turning sixteen next month. He had attempted to claim Saska's collar before he was of age. And he'd done it by using his taint on the sparring mat.

I returned my attention to the conversation.

"It is the law," a familiar voice said. I leaned over the balcony further and caught sight of his blonde head sitting beside his grandfather.

"Then it is settled. For the crime of using your taint in a sparring match and for the attempted claiming of a collar whilst underage, Frey Alcir is hereby banished for life from the Kensillan Territory Rail. He will be given the remainder of his rations and be released from the train at the next station. Never to be welcome aboard again. If one encounters him on a Hunt, he is to be shunned."

Volnor, the Council Adjudicator stamped down his staff and brought the meeting to a close, after which Tomas, serving as Council Justice took Frey's arm in his grasp and escorted him from The Council Chambers.

This was crazy. Frey was a child. They couldn't send him off the train. He'd die out there alone. How could Rhydian advocate for this? Rhydian, the so-called resistance fighter who raided military compounds, and who freed Thralls and stole supplies—how could he condone the death of a teenage boy?

I rushed down to the first level trying to reach Rhydian. I had half a mind to call him a traitor when I saw him, a child abuser even knowing neither of those two things were true. I even opened my mouth to do just that when I noticed he was speaking Seja and trying to hide it.

"All of them. Thirty minutes. *Abattoir*," his gestures said.

The words had been spoken to Jordry and Lera who immediately left the carriage.

*Rhydian was jumping the train? Why?*

I caught up to Saska on my way from the next carriage and confronted him about the incident. Even in comparison, Saska without the use of his blessing was still one of the most dangerous fighters on the train. Frey had to have lost his mind to attack him. When I said as much, finding his version of events hard to believe considering his skills, he told me to speak to my husband.

Something wasn't adding up, and I needed to find out what.

I was relieved when I found the bunks empty. I didn't know what I would say to them if they saw me packing my things. I'd accumulated quite a bit since my arrival, and as I didn't know where I would be following Rhydian, but was not willing to be caught out like last time, I pulled on anything I could find that hadn't been sent to the laundry. I tucked Etrina securely into my boot and then headed for the back of the train.

The Pipe Room was as far as I made it before encountering any Runners. I used the cover of the pipes to shield me from their view, but not them from me. Each one passed over the walk bridge, first Mal and Si'mon, then Jordry and Amida, until within the span of three minutes I had seen all 129 Runners on the train cross through the carriage. And accompanying each one was a child. In some cases, more than one, the youngest two newborns bundled in blankets in Eleen and Oric's arms.

They were the ones taking the children!

My nails dug into the flesh of my palms. It took every conscious thought to not break the skin and reveal myself.

Terrible, horrible thoughts ran through my head at that moment. Thoughts that drifted to rumours I'd heard on the run about ships that kidnapped Blessed children off the coast and sold them to the highest bidder. Rumours that had me avoiding travelling those routes for fear of what I'd do if I ever encountered one of those kidnappers.

I knew Rhydian was capable of selling someone. He'd sold Kris. He was planning on selling me, had sold me already in fact. Even with everything I was feeling for him, the idea that he was capable of selling a child—

My stomach churned violently at the prospect.

Another minute passed and I felt the motion of the train begin to slow down.

It was now or never.

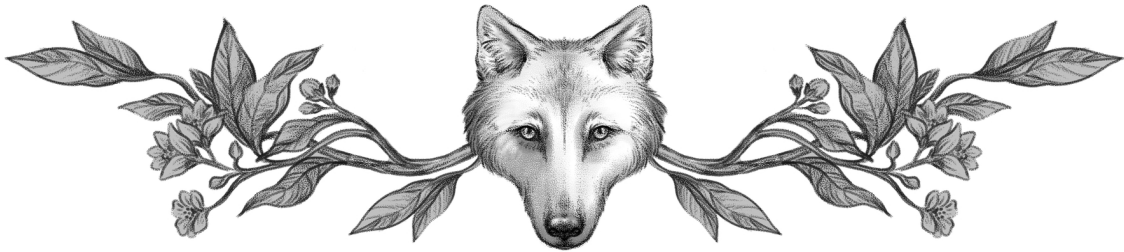
I jumped for the metal of the bridge and swung myself up until I was standing. I crossed over the laundry bridgeway, the passengers below taking no notice of me and ran through *The Cells* and into *The Livestock Car* where only half of the enclosures were occupied. I climbed to the second-floor bridgeway and hid just inside the doorway of the next carriage. From here I could see down into *The Abattoir* where the Runners were huddled around every last child on the train.

Amongst them, in his red jacket was Rhydian, an expression of intense concentration on his face. And wrapped in a heavy coat in his arms was Ghena.

The train came to a crawl but never stopped.

The Runners wasted no time. Within seconds they had pulled the carriage door open and with a child strapped or clinging to their bodies, they jumped from the train with military precision.

Rhydian was the last to depart. The moment he did, I raced after him, bounding off *The Abattoir* floor and out the door into the cold chill of the morning air.



## RIEKA

*99 days until Marian 1st*

The Runners weren't exactly surprised to see me.

Amida burst out laughing, demanding her husband Jordry pay up, Eleen swore before apologising when one of the kids claimed she'd said a bad word, whilst Mal simply rolled his eyes and took Ghena in his already full hands to leave me to the glare of his commander.

After about a minute Rhydian finally spoke. Or rather he grunted. Like an angry child who had just been scolded. He rummaged through his jacket, pulled out a looping device and placed it on my collar, giving me forty-eight hours before I was forced back on the train.

Rhydian turned to leave but halted when he heard my inner voice.

*"Just answer me one question?"*

He remained with his back turned to me, but didn't move further. I took that as a willingness to listen. *"Are you selling them?"*

His head snapped back around at me, his expression one of utter disgust and—*disbelief?*

I watched his jaw clench as his inner voice gave me an order. ***"Stay close, stay quiet."***

We'd walked a few minutes in the direction the train left when to my utter astonishment, we happened upon Frey. Amusing himself with a small ember of fire that he weaved between his fingers like a coin. Frey looked up from his spot beneath a tree, and upon seeing us simply stood and lifted his pack over his shoulder. Not a single degree of shock on his face at our arrival, as though he was expecting us.

This had to be some convoluted plan, but for what ends—

No one told me anything as Frey joined us in our trek. It was clear something else was going on, but all I could do was speculate as we walked a further thirty minutes into the woods.

It was in a gully, covered in branches and leaves that we came upon three vehicles.

They were odd. They were cylindrical rather than boxed as I was accustomed to, and there were no doors and no wheels.

I watched as Mal touched where the door ought to be and had to contain my shock when the wall of the vehicle popped outward and up. One by one the Runners moved all the children into the three vehicles. I climbed into the same one as Rhydian, sitting beside him, taking a weak and tired Ghena onto my lap. The little she-wolf now entirely human, snuggled into my chest as Rhydian pressed a button on the dashboard.

A topographical map appeared on what looked to be a tech board, floating just in front of Rhydian. He touched the screen, sliding his fingers across the black glass to adjust the image. He tapped the screen twice and a series of Lycoan letters and numbers appeared, after which he typed in some kind of sequence which caused the panel to beep and the map to vanish. The vehicle vibrated beneath me and a moment later the world outside the vehicle dropped. I

turned to look out the back window and saw the other two vehicles now levitated above the forest floor.

No engine rumble, no tyres breaking earth beneath us. We were entirely silent as the vehicle moved through the forest.

Rhydian had also taken to giving me the silent treatment. For two hours, he just stared out the windows and ignored me. Even when we passed through a pair of ruined towers, he said nothing.

The anger I'd witnessed in *The Bathhouse* was preferential to his silent treatment.

Wherever it was we were going, it required us to walk the last hour on foot. Rhydian took possession of Ghena, lifting her into his arms since she didn't have the strength to walk herself, and led the group from the front.

When we crested a hill ten minutes later, the first thing I saw was the turrets of a castle. Like a grey giant dozing on a hill, the castle loomed over a large valley. Beyond were dozens of fields spreading out perpendicular to a village that was situated at the base of the castle.

The scent of freshly turned soil and pine from the forest beyond mixed with the scent of the village, where their thatched roofs peaked out from behind a great stone wall in the middle of construction.

And right outside the wall, in various forms of use were half a dozen trucks like the ones from Old Kings Town.

If the trucks were here, did that mean we were still in Kensilla?

Large steel doors built into the stone wall stood open. Beyond them the village. Blessed-made buildings of stone and timber forked out from those large doors all the way to the castle whose own walls ran in a series of circles, each wall taller and thicker than the one before it.

As we encroached on the village, I saw Blessed by the dozens, working and chatting, passing in and out of the gates and into the outer village beyond. Most to my surprise, greeted us in Seja.

A familiar scent niggled at my senses—*spiced mead and peppercorns*? My gaze was drawn to three figures walking down the village road.



A man with black waves, a thick beard, and carrying a single axe that he casually rested on his shoulder passed through the gates. I recognised him as Rhydian's friend, the Tahzi tribesman Jonah. Beside him walked another man, slightly shorter, with a thinner frame and a pair of brown feathered Talon wings on his back.

Taren! He looked healthy. His face was fuller, his hair more vibrant. There was a new purple-dyed hide strip in his hair, and the scabbing around his neck was now a pink ring. And he was smiling.

But it was who he was smiling at that caused me to run.

A woman stood between the two men. A very petite and tiny woman, with a laugh like a hissing cat and hair as white as the place she was born.

*"Kris?"*

She scented me before I'd even called her name. The basket she'd been carrying was discarded into Jonah's arms and she too bolted into a run. We collided at the base of the hill, the grass cushioning our fall as we embraced in a joyous fit of hysterics.

She was here, she was alive. Kris was alive.

"I've missed you," I finally said as Kris attempted to wipe my tears from my cheeks.

"Your hair's changing back," she noted with a smile, gently pulling on the strands hanging from my brow.

"I'm so sorry Kris," I murmured as I wiped at her tears.

"Nonsense." She frowned as she dusted the grass from my coat. "You can do whatever you like with your hair."

*Gods I'd missed her!*

I'd convinced myself, that even if I managed to leave the train, managed to remove my collar, there was such a slim chance of finding Krisenya, that I'd likely spend the rest of my life searching. I'd lost all hope.

"Thank you for bringing her back to me."

Rhydian, Ghena still in his arms, froze at Kris' address. He turned, expression pensive and pursed his lips.

"I didn't." He cleared his throat. "Your friend brought herself."

Kris, apparently confused by his comment, repeated his statement to me, to which I replied, "I did indeed bring myself. Though where I

was coming to, I did not know since Rhydian had not seen fit to divulge that part."

For the first time in hours, Rhydian looked me in the eyes. "I did not divulge it because I had sworn to another not to. And I don't break my promises." I failed to be unaffected by his comment.

"And since I hadn't removed your collar, as I'd intended..." His voice seemed to catch in his throat as his eyes fell upon my collar. "I did not think it was worth the pain of knowing about this place and being unable to remain here. I was saving you the pain." Then, for the shortest of moments, his gaze dropped to my lips. "I see now it was a mistake."

Rhydian adjusted his grip on Ghena. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get her inside. I'll leave her in your care, Krisenya."

What did he mean he intended to remove my collar? What did he mean he had sworn not to speak of this place? What was this place? How dare he just walk away from me without saying another word.

"I see what Taren means." Kris sniffed at the air where Rhydian had just been.

"See what?"

Her gaze was inquisitive, almost amused. Taren, who had just arrived beside his sister provided me with the answer. "You and Rhydian. Your scents spike around one another. They react to each other's presence."

"Of course they would. They're married." Taren and Kris both turned to Jonah, brows knitted, expressions identical to one another.

"Did neither of you know that?" said the Bear-Blessed Brute, all three of them turning to me for an answer.

I spent the rest of the morning trying to clarify the information the three of them possessed regarding my situation. In the end I'd worked out that whilst all three became recently aware of how Taren and Kris came to be in the village, and under what circumstances, Jonah was the only one who knew of my marriage to Rhydian, and who believed it to be real.

I'd even managed to get Jonah to divulge that the children were all brought here because their parents had been the ones to request it. The parents.

But that didn't explain Frey or his banishment.

"It was Rhydian's plan. He knew the kids wouldn't trust a group of strangers, so he asked Frey to come here." He'd then gone on to say that they couldn't take Frey like the other children. His mother was on the council and refused to let him leave, even with the sickness on board the train. Then Jonah said the most surprising part.

"Some Pazgari offered to help."

The only Pazgari that had anything to do with the situation was Saskia. Stoic, silent, artist-loving Saskia was in on it.

This all made my guilt over accusing Rhydian so much heavier.

"You're quiet," Kris said to me a little while after the men had left to tend to their village chores. She'd taken it upon herself to show me around Gerhold. That's what they called this place, this haven for Blessed.

We walked back up the hill, past a group of buildings that were still being built. The Blessed there were wielding air and metal to construct the frames.

"I feel like I should apologise."

"And for what part of this entire situation do you feel guilt over?" Kris said, curiosity coating her tone. "You certainly weren't to blame for Taren getting captured. You told him to stay put and he chose to ignore you. And as for my being here—that was all on Rhydian. You're only crime Rieka was being in the wrong place at the wrong time." She paused and came to a stop outside an old stone building. "Tiny certainly would not wish for you to wallow in his death."

Kris had cried with me when I had told her of my brother's passing, of what he had done to save me and of what I had done—what that dark part of me had done in vengeance for his death. There had been no shame. Just the embrace of one who loved and accepted me and all my faults. And I had been grateful for her and her odd words of prayer to her silent gods. The way my body seemed to relax at the idea that Tiny had joined her Eldertides was unexpectedly comforting. For the first time in many months, I was able to bring forth his grouchy old-man face to the surface of my thoughts without the hollow ache in my chest threatening to cave it in.

Kris' presence was a long-awaited breath after being submerged under water. Unexpected and euphoric. But after euphoria comes the ever-present crashing down of reality, and Krisenya Tenamai was nothing if not a realist.

"So I must conclude that it is the fact you are in love with him that is plaguing you."

I kept my eyes on the stone building as I answered. "I'm not in love with Rhydian."

Kris scoffed. "Even the Eldertides would not believe you."

I walked over to the building. I'd concluded it was a temple, the stone looked much older than the current buildings being constructed. Perhaps it was part of the original village before Rhydian had settled it. Jonah had divulged that piece of information to me a few hours ago. It was founded years ago by Rhydian's mother Eydis and had been used as a haven for rescued and freed Thralls ever since. Lycoa didn't even know we were here.

The fact I was in Prea wasn't lost on me. "See, I got you here in the end," Kris had joked when they'd told me. They also breezed over the part where the council didn't know about it. They knew it existed, but as far as Jonah knew, the council on the train were entirely unaware of Rhydian's intentions with it.

To be a home for the passengers when they were free.

Everything clicked for me in that moment. Every decision Rhydian had made, every action. Why he worked as a Bloodhound, why he fought so hard to protect the passengers, to steal supplies, to free the Thralls. He'd been fighting to free the passengers all along.

The only part I didn't understand was my position in all this.

I changed the subject. "What is this place?"

Kris barely looked at the building as she answered. "A temple to The Nine. The people who lived here before wielded it from the ground in their honour."

I ran my hand over the outer stone wall. No seam, no edges, as if the rock had been moulded in one singular piece. "And what about after the Fall, what was it then?"

"Nothing. This estate belonged to a family called Imaris. They were culled in the Marian 1<sup>st</sup> Massacre. Until recently it was abandoned, now they're planning on turning it into the School House." Sensing I was about to ask another question, Kris interjected. "Rieka, changing the subject will not erase the issue."

I stepped into the temple. "How can I love a man I do not trust, a man I do not know?"

It was oddly warm for a ruin. The grey stone shone under the afternoon sun. Wide glassless windows welcomed the evening air. Gods' Tongue scripture that spoke of worship and sacrifice carved into the floor. A single bench lined one wall. I sat there as Kris wandered in after me.

"I do not think you are being fair to him," she said

My gaze slowly lifted to where she stood by the window, her gaze on the figures outside. On Jonah who stood chopping firewood to stoke the village hearths. Frostfall was only a few weeks away, and the air had already taken on the winter chill.

"I have known you for six months Rieka and even I do not know the truth about why you fled Deos. Nor did I care. But then I was not in love with you."

Her words cut. A long slithering tear around my heart.

Slow strides lead Kris to take the seat beside me. "I know why it is he kidnapped me from Keltjar, Rieka. It is not something I have told Taren, because it is something only Rhydian and I share. A shame he has asked me to keep. He came to me some time ago. Until then I'd spent months here unaware my sudden departure from Keltjar was his doing. He came to tell me the truth, and in recompense, I asked him to bring me you."

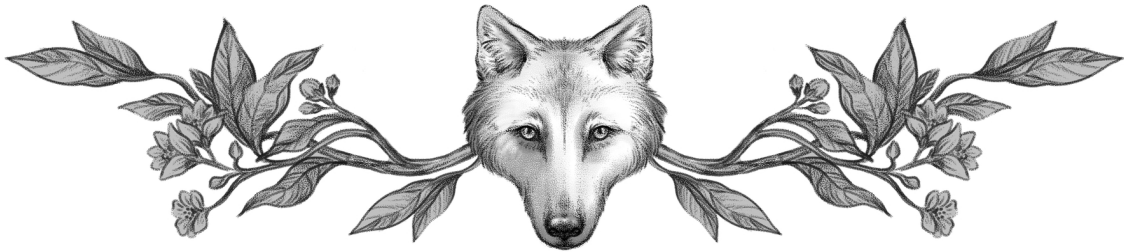
My eyes widen. *Did that mean?*

Kris shook her head. "I am not the one who he made the deal with, that was made long before he and I met, and long before I suspect his feelings for you developed. We Kanahari know two things about love. That it takes time and does not work without truth. You say you don't trust him, but perhaps it is yourself you do not trust."

Tears began to well in my eyes. My fingers fidgeted with the tie of my gloves, brushing over the place where my worship marks were hidden, a constant reminder of where my trust had led me.

"I cannot love him, Kris. I am a broken creature who has only ever destroyed the people I have loved." My breath caught as I looked at her, my anguish clawing at my throat. "I will destroy him and I cannot, will not be the reason he ceases to be in the world."

She grasped my hand, stilling my tremors. Her forehead came to rest on mine. A rarity amongst different species of Brute. But Kris was a rare woman. She squeezed my hand in comfort. "Do you not think, that is his choice to make?"



## RIEKA

There was no village hall. That had fallen to ruin centuries ago. Instead, every resident of Gerhold ventured into the castle upon sundown.

Bright lights and warm hearths illuminated the homes of the village like fireflies on a hill, but it was the castle that burned brightest.

It radiated warmth. Every fire, every scent, every smile. Even the way the villagers had greeted me felt warm.

Lady Kanyk, they had called me. And not like the children when they addressed me during baking class. Here it was spoken like a title. As if I were the lady to their lord.

Children I'd known to be missing only weeks earlier ran the halls filled with new life, no sign of the sickness upon them. Couples ate together in intimate huddles on the long benches. Drinking songs were sung without care. Even the elderly Blessed with their life-weary bodies wandered the halls with expressions of peace on their beautiful, aged faces.

I'd tried to enjoy it, being in this place, enjoying being back in the company of my friends. But not even learning Jonah and Kris where an item could eradicate the shadow that was hanging over my heart since my conversation with her.

The sight of Rhydian sitting with the Runners, smiling and laughing fuelled the ache in my chest. The same sight as our first encounter on the train.

If I could take back that day, take back all the days with him—if I could would I do it?

How quick my answer had come. How effortless of a response from my body.

I stood and walked over to where he sat with Eleen and the others, so free that my heart ached. "Is there somewhere we can talk?"

Rhydian had stood in silence as he looked at me. Then in silence, he led me through the castle.

As we made our way up a stone spiral stair, the steps beneath my feet worn, I delighted in the way in which the light glinted off the golden strands of his hair.

As we passed over the timber floors and tapestried walls of half a dozen halls, I noticed the way he slowed his steps so I didn't have to rush through the unfamiliar castle.

And when something had caught my interest, he stopped and without a word let me admire it.

At the end of a long hall, a door stood ajar. Rhydian stopped before it and pushed it open, indicating for me to enter.

Only after I had entered did he seal the world off behind us.

It was a bedchamber. At least in part. A tall canopy bed stood off to one side of the room, heavy velvet drapes hanging in a deep earthy green. A series of floor-to-ceiling wardrobes stretched along the stone walls on either side. A copper tub like the one in his office sat by the window.

The other half of this room was filled with books. Hundreds upon hundreds of books stacked on the wall-to-wall bookshelves. This was where Rhydian decided to go. Behind a wooden desk the size of a large bed.

And where he continued to give me the silent treatment.

Knowing Rhydian wasn't going to be the first to break it, I took another step into the room. "The children are not sick here," I noted,



unable to voice what I had intended to. The children felt like a more pressing topic of conversation.

Rhydian leaned back in the giant armchair he'd sat in behind his desk. "They are not. Whatever is making them sick, it is limited to the train."

I nodded my agreement. "It is good that you brought them all here. Where it is safer."

His mouth set into a hard line. "As opposed to selling them," he said, fixing me with a scathing glare.

"You cannot blame me for thinking you capable, Rhydian. Or I would not still be here."

Rhydian sighed. "Is that why you wanted to speak? To remind me of my greatest shame. Well, you needn't have bothered. Your presence does that well enough." He spoke so calmly, if it weren't for his scent, I would not have believed him angry.

I took a step back, frustration edging my nerves. "If my presence bothers you so much. Then I'll leave."

His chair screeched. "Do I mean anything to you?"

Rhydian's words turned my body to lead, cementing me like a statue to the floor halfway across the room. My heart tightened as his scent cruelly erased any other from my senses.

I kept my back to him. "You are the man who has sold me as a slave. You are the key to my freedom. What else is there to care about?" The words were cruel, spoken to cut. To shield me and prevent me from saying what I truly wanted.

His boots sounded on the floor in soft precise taps as he moved closer. "Then why come after me at the garrison?"

I spun around at his words, an answer caught on my tongue.

Rhydian took another step closer. "You would have been free of me. Your secret once again your own. No matter how long I think about it, I'm always left with the same conclusion." He took another step.

"And what is that?" I asked when the heat of his stare threatened to burn through me.

Rhydian took another hesitant step towards me, his eyes never leaving my face. "The same reason you gave me this." He held up

his right wrist, revealing the leather marriage band I'd given him.

"You care for me. Regardless of everything. You have grown to care for me."

I closed the distance between us in an instant and stared up into those oceanic eyes. "A wolf does not care for her prey."

I turned once again, resolved to end this conversation, only for Rhydian to reach out and grab my hand, halting me. My body reacted to his touch, the skin raising in goosebumps, my stomach fluttering.

"And yet the prey cares for his wolf." Rhydian breathed out the words so effortlessly I thought I'd imagined it. With every word he spoke, every caress of his thumb on my hand, the tether he had on my heart tightened. He moved closer, so close that his breath brushed at my cheek.

"You are the bane of my existence. And you are existence itself. Without you Rieka, I simply cease to be."

My voice was no more than a whisper. "You do not mean that."

"Oh but I do." He chuckled softly. "If I had known you only in a dream, I would choose endless sleep if it meant being with you. I am so irrevocably in love with you that you could kill a thousand gods and I would still love you."

Desperation lived in those eyes, a plea for me to understand him. To know the words he spoke were not a lie. I reached up, my hand trembling as I cupped his cheek. "Do not say things you do not mean, Rhydian," I begged as he leaned into my touch, his lips kissing my palm. "Words have consequences."

Rhydian straightened, a determined look in his eyes. "So do actions." He pulled out the pin that fastened his hair, the golden waves falling loose upon his shoulder, and held it as one would a knife. "We had a deal and I lost."

He sliced the tip straight across his palm. As the blood dripped on the cold grey stone between us, he made an oath.

"I, Alastair Rhydian Imaris Kanyk, son of Eydis Imaris, descendant of the Hemopathic Line of Agiron Imaris, swear to the one I know as Rieka, that for as long as I live, I will never let her be claimed,

enslaved, or chained against her wishes by another living being, be they Human, Tainted or God. This is my vow to her.”

I was undone. Unstuck from the world.

The gods had made a man who possessed the exact words that could unravel my very soul and cast him upon me in such a manner I had no other choice but to love him.

But was I even capable of that any longer?

The words came out slowly, tentatively. As if I half expected him to refuse my request. “Lock the door.”

Rhydian’s eyes searched mine, a question held there. If we did this, there was no going back for him.

I took a deep breath without taking my eyes off him. “Please.”

He brushed past me, heading for the door. When the lock clicked, I turned around to find Rhydian staring at me.

“Kiss me.”

Rhydian crossed the expanse of the room, took my face in his hands and did exactly as I had asked. His lips touched mine and the world ceased to exist.

Never had I wanted a kiss more than this one. Never had I wanted to be kissed then I did right now. This kiss was more than just my body’s desperate desire to feel connected. Rhydian’s kiss—the way his tongue searched the contours of my mouth in some desperate plea to explore every part of me. It was a question posed to myself as much as him.

*Am I still capable of being loved?*

His hand roamed my back, the other sliding up my hip to beneath my shirt, heat swarming where he touched my skin. My breath shuttered. “Stop.”

Rhydian froze. His hands ceased their exploration of my body and he moved them, out from my shirt and off my body. He took a trembling breath as he stepped away from me, just far enough that our breaths still mingled in the air between us.

He breathed out my name. It was another question.

“I would like you to remove your clothes,” I said, unable to contain the quivering of my voice.

There was no quivering in his. “If that is your wish.”

The leather jacket which I had come to associate with him was shrugged off. Rhydian then lowered his hands to his waist where he unbuckled his belt, and upon pulling it from the band he untucked his shirt and lifted it over his head.

He removed his boots next, first one and then the other. Then he slid his hands into his waistband and dropped his trousers.

I'd seen Rhydian naked before. I knew what his body looked like, but there was something different about him. He was breathtaking. He was truly the most beautiful man I had ever known.

Or maybe it was me who was different? Perhaps I saw him differently now that I knew he loved me. Now that I knew I loved him.

I took a trembling breath and lifted my hand to his chest, where my fingers traced the runes of his Sul. An act of intimacy only permitted for one soul in a lifetime. His Dana.

Rhydian did not stop me.

I let my fingers trail down, mapping the contours of his chest, grazing them lightly over his nipple, awakening his erection. My touch lingered as I skimmed my fingers across the breadth of his chest and around his shoulders, circling his naked body.

Rhydian continued to stare, his eyes following me as I moved, the intensity of his gaze causing every nerve in my body to tremble.

His hand found mine, his fingers catching the fabric of my glove, and he fixed me with a heated gaze. I nodded my head, granting him permission to the question not voiced.

Rhydian removed my gloves and placed them on the floor with his garments. He ran the back of his knuckles down the material of my buckskin vest and upon reaching the fastening, he pulled. The shirt fell open, the air stirring my breasts. Heat burned behind his eyes as my nipples hardened.

I hadn't intended on wearing so little, but the castle was Kindling heated and the layers that I'd worn off the train had been two too many, so I'd stripped down to my buckskin. Now I wondered if it wouldn't have been more enjoyable to make him take each layer off slowly and savour it.

My skin tingled where his fingers touched as he slid the buckskin over my shoulders, his fingers ghosting down the skin of my arms as he let it drop to the floor at my feet. His eyes caressed me, his chest beginning to rise and fall in quick succession as he beheld me.

A moment passed and his lips parted, and I found myself unable to stop. I kissed him and every part of me that had been clinging to rationality fled. I wrapped my hands around his neck, and he lifted me into his arms, my body fusing with his as we crossed the expanse to reach his bed.

Never had I wanted anything more and never had I been so afraid to obtain it.

Rhydian laid me on the bed, drawing out a kiss from my lips, then trailed them down my body. First in the curve of my neck, along the length of my scar, then on the mound of my breasts until he was looking up at me where he perched atop my thighs.

A wicked grin emerged on his face.

He remained hovering over me, his hand caressing my body in one long stroke as he feathered his touch from collarbone to navel, his hand drifting down to the waistband of my trousers. He moved back up to kiss me, an incendiary kiss. All while he was sliding his hand beneath my waistband and between my thighs.

A pleased moan slipped from my lips when his fingers entered me. I tried to catch my breath when he withdrew them, but he reinserted them just as quickly. His lips returned to mine, extracting a sharp gasp from me that turned into another moan as his fingers fucked me perilously close to the brink, threatening to unravel me. And just when I thought he would let me come, Rhydian left me on the precipice.

My pants and boots were quickly discarded, and he returned to his position over me where he paused as if suddenly startled. His hair hung loose, the golden waves tickling the skin of my shoulder as he hovered over me.

"Gods you're beautiful," he said, as I ran my hand through his thick waves.

I pulled him to me, his lips eager to consume, refusing to relent even when our bodies were finally pressed against one another. With

ease, he sat up and lifted me to straddle him.

A cry and a whimper escaped me as he sucked at the sensitive skin beneath my collarbone, his hand roving the skin of my thighs where they wrapped around his hips.

Another whimper and his fingers are once again inside of me, readying me for him, this thumb working deliriously slow circles on my clit. I could feel his length against my stomach when he drew another moan from my mouth. Bracing myself against Rhydian, I rose up and welcomed him inside me.

Never once did his eyes stray from mine where I straddled him on the bed. Even when the ecstasy he kept out of my reach cried treason because he wanted me to take it slower, to relish in our bodies' hunger for one another, he never turned from my gaze.

A possessiveness seemed to take over me then, a primitive drive that needed more of him than what I had been given. I hadn't been touched in such a way, allowed control in this way for a very long time—it was nearly too much for my body to take.

Rhydian's hands pressed into my back and in a singular move, he had us lying down on the bed.

Fevered moans spilled from my lips with every thrust he made. With our bodies prone against one another, a leg draped over his hip, our lips immovable from one another, I realised that Rhydian had torn at my carefully and meticulously built walls.

His lips crashed into mine when he made that final thrust and the dam inside me, the one I had been building since that night in Keltjar finally burst.



I'd grown accustomed to his playing with my hair. Somewhere between our first kiss and now, I realised it was his favourite part of

me. Not my lips, or the lines of my body, or even my eyes. Rhydian had fallen in love with me, and it had all started with my hair.

If I was a betting woman—and I was—my money would be on the day in the cave.

Now as I lay on his chest, the warmth of his body better than any fire, our bodies wrought with wonderful exhaustion, his fingers combed the black and white strands down my naked back.

“Is your first name really Alastair?”

Rhydian’s fingers paused their stroking and he spoke, amusement light on his tone. “That’s what you took from that speech, my name?”

I rested my hand under my chin so that I might look at his face. He was marvellously dishevelled. The result of my ravenous appetite. And he was all mine. “When were you going to tell me the part about you being a prince?”

Rhydian sighed, rolling his head back into the pillow, as if the topic of conversation was one that bored him. “I’m not a prince.”

I traced the line of his runes, the words that called him leader and protector interconnecting to one another. “Yet you call yourself descendant of Agiron Imaris.”

The last son of the last king of Kensilla, the history books said. Long thought to have died during the Marian 1<sup>st</sup> Massacre. Entire Blessed bloodlines were wiped out during the military coup, including the Kensillan Royal Family. Or so the continent thought.

Rhydian took my hand and brought it to his lips to kiss. “It has been a long time since anyone has considered us royalty.”

“I think you and I live on different trains,” I said. It wasn’t hard to notice the passengers considered him more than a leader. Eleen had fought me because of his position. He was the closest thing the rail had to royalty.

Rhydian’s hand moved to my chin on his chest and he lifted it so our eyes could meet. “I am no one Rieka. I have a title to a kingdom that no longer exists, over a people who would rather serve sadistic gods than let me serve them. I am an Imaris in name and blood only. All I can offer you is my heart.”

I shifted from his grasp, sliding up his body until I could feel the feather-light touch of his breath on my face, and I kissed him. Slowly, to savour him.

"All I can offer you, dear husband," I said when I released him, "is cake."

Rhydian chuckled, the sound a stirring of butterflies in my stomach. "I'll tell my mother." He smiled, returning to that same joke from when we'd first met.

"Kris tells me this place was her idea." I knew it was a hard subject for him to talk about, but his mother was part of him, so I wanted to know more about her and about why she built this place.

"It was. She found it listed in the train records as a vacation home. While she was a Runner she started using it to stock supplies. When my father was alive, they tried to convince the council that we needed to have a plan in place for when we freed the passengers."

"The council didn't approve?"

Rhydian took a long breath. "That law that dictates members of my family must remain on the train indefinitely from the age of twenty-five, she refused to do it."

"But you said people died the last time that happened," I pointed out.

A weight seemed to pass over his expression, a shadow darkening his features. "The law that entails that all Kanyks must claim the collars of their predecessor at twenty-five is a council law. The true law is that we can never leave, not permanently. The loopers you and Eleen use were made for my family, initially to allow us the ability to leave the train. But my ancestors discovered there was a forty-eight-hour time limit. If the Kanyk collar wasn't back on board the train within that window of time, before the train's tech system bypassed the looper, every passenger with a collar would be executed."

I didn't know what to be more shocked about. The fact Rhydian just insinuated that his family shared one collar between them, or that they had to kill one another to obtain it. In order to protect the passengers, Rhydian had to kill his grandfather.



The Core has done this. I'd spent enough time in Kensilla to know that major decisions like the imprisonment of thousands of Blessed were not made without their say-so. The Kensillan Gods had not only ordered the imprisonment of Rhydian's ancestors, but they made them all murderers.

"Couldn't they have just refused? Let the wearer die of old age and just leave the collar on the train without a wearer."

"Not if we don't want the train to stop. The Imaris collars are sadistic. They must be on a living person for the train to continue running. And before you ask, not just anyone will do. The collar only works on those with Imaris blood. Anyone else and the train stops and every passenger onboard dies."

A thought suddenly occurred to me, a horrible little thought that made me grit my teeth. "They make you sacrifice your family for the good of the people you serve."

His expression showed his disdain for the topic. "You sound just like my grandfather. *There must always be an Imaris aboard the rail.* He might be resolved to his fate. But I'm not. I refuse to let another generation grow up with the belief their sole purpose in life is to kill their parent in order to prevent the deaths of hundreds. I will not let my niece or nephew be born into that world. It's why I've fought so hard to get this place established. To make it safe. We've all lived here at some point just to make certain of that. To ensure its safety and protection."

"Every Runner?" I was suddenly struck with the thought of Si'mon, Amida and Anika flying without walls, of Lex and Lera with sun on their faces instead of shadow.

"Apart from Wade and Sal, they have all lived here at some point."

I rolled over in the crook of his shoulder, trailing my touch down his arms to entwine them with his fingers. "Sal I understand," I said. Sal was the only Organic after all. "But why not Wade?"

Rhydian returned to stroking my hair. "Wade swore he'd never take a home unless Sal could live in it with him. Until they could find somewhere safe to build a home."

Wade hadn't struck me as the romantic type. But then again, I had believed him a cold-blooded murderer until very recently. I'd been

wrong about a great many things. My biases had led me to all the wrong conclusions, about everything. Especially about Rhydian.

"I hate to break it to you, but if you want safe, I'd get rid of the schoolhouse." It surprised me that for godless people, they thought it prudent to keep such a godly place.

Rhydian's brow knitted in confusion, so I continued, recalling the symbols on the stone.

"There is Gods' Tongue carved into the floor. It would be unwise to allow children in a building where the very words written beneath their feet are a god's thanks for sacrificing souls in their name."

If Rhydian was surprised by my willingness to acknowledge my connection to that tongue, he kept it to himself. He instead shifted under me as he stretched to get something from the bedside table. His hairpin dagger. "You're not going to make another oath, are you?" I asked jokingly.

"No," Rhydian said, sitting up. "I have made enough of those to last me a lifetime." I watched then as he dug the pin into the skin of his palm. My body had been pushed to the brink of exhaustion over the last few hours not even my wolf cared about the scent of Rhydian's blood.

A small pool formed where the pin was impaled. Rhydian removed the tip from his skin, letting it run into the palm of his hand. He closed his fist over the scarlet pool. There was a sudden spike in his scent that lingered only as long as his hand remained closed.

When he opened his hand, the small pool of blood was gone, replaced by a crimson crystalline shard.

He offered it to me.

Hesitantly I took the crimson shard, holding it up to admire in the light. If I had not witnessed it myself, I would easily mistake it for a jewel.

Rhydian returned the pin to the side table, satisfied that I was so fascinated by his gift he finally told me his reasoning for giving me a literal part of himself.

"Now we both have a way to find one another."

Tears sprang to my eyes as I regarded the gift.

"You're repulsed by it," he said upon noticing my crying.

"Never." Rhydian immediately pulled me towards him, tucking me into his body as the tears continued to fall. Tenderly he kissed my cheek, catching a tear as it fell. His lips feathered over my skin to catch another. And another, and another until finally, I had to speak.

My words came out in a whisper. "Thank you."

"Whatever for?"

I wanted to tell him the truth, all of it. About why I ran, about who I was, and what I had done to get here. I wanted to tell him everything that led me to this moment in his arms, where I felt safe. I wanted him to know that he made me feel safe.

But I just couldn't. So instead I raised my hand to his face, brushed his hair behind his ear, and told him the only truth I could.

"Thank you for loving me."



*I heard a snap of a branch breaking. The smell of anger saturated the air.*

*Alert, I sat up and spied the black wolf standing ten feet away in the long grass. Her golden eyes locked on mine. Fury screamed in her eyes as she hovered over the spilled basket at her feet. The air wailing around her.*

*He called my name.*

*I twisted to face him.*

*His starlit eyes were wide. His mouth moved, my name on his tongue.*

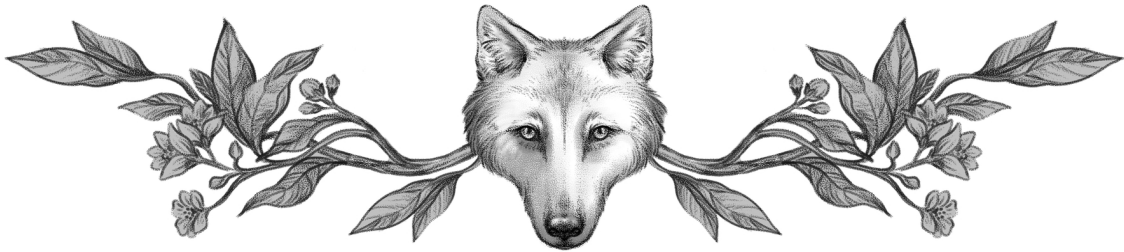
*Great crimson ravines appeared across this chest as though invisible claws had angrily raked through his flesh, the blood splattering my face.*

*He collapsed into my arms; my name coughed up through blood-stained lips.*

*He wheezed out a word breathlessly. "Please." Iridescent tears trailed from his terrified eyes. "Say my name."*

*A great bellow of a sob is dragged from my lips. "I can't."*

*I raised my hand into the air and plunged it into his chest until I could feel his heart beating against my palm. And I squeezed as a raw blood-curdling scream ripped from my lungs.*



## RIEKA

*The Gardens* were the closest thing to a forest on the train. Overgrown and wild, Sal had managed to keep the grove in a state of controlled chaos, so the trees never grew any faster than could be maintained, and never any higher to cause damage. It was a place Rhydian and I had frequented quite often when he first started to claim what was between my legs.

So, when Rhydian took me there after morning training the day after our return from Gerhold Hall, I had expected him to take me into the grove once more.

But his choice of location was much more public. He led me to the fountain at the centre of the grove, to the bench with the gold statue in clear view of anyone who walked by. Rhydian took the seat beside it.

Taking his lead I climbed onto his lap, his hands wrapping around my waist as I explored his mouth with my tongue, relishing in the sweetness of him.

*"If you wanted us to have sex in public,"* my inner voice said breathlessly. *"We could have just stayed in the Fight Hall."*

Rhydian coughed into the kiss, forcing me to pull away. He had the most amused expression. "Rieka. I brought you here to introduce you to my mother."

I sat back in his lap, studying his face. He was serious. But Rhydian's mother was dead, wasn't she? Then I realised where we were sitting.

The gold glistened under the morning sun, a ray of light cast down and across the pages of the book in the statue's hand.

I jumped from Rhydian's lap and wiped my lips with the back of my hand as he adjusted himself in his pants.

My gaze flittered between him and the woman. The woman who upon closer inspection looked remarkably like the sketches in Lily's room.

"Rieka. This is Eydis Kanyk. My mother."

I was going to tell him off for playing such a cruel joke. But the sincerity on his face gave me pause. "Your mother. The statue?" I'll admit, in that moment, I thought he'd gone mad.

Rhydian leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his voice melancholic. "She's not a statue."

I opened my mouth to speak and then I heard it. The beat of a heart. Inside the statue.

"She's a Liminal!" I said in disbelief, my curiosity drawing me closer as Rhydian fixed his gaze on me.

My mother used to tell me stories about Liminals. How the gods would punish those that had offended them and turn them to stone. The mythical Illen Fields of Prea were said to be filled with the souls of those who'd angered the gods, the location lost since the Gods Fall. I'd even heard rumours on the roads to The Hetra, amongst the campfires of Imperial Guard regiments on border patrols that it was the favoured punishment of the Gods Hold. But I'd never seen one before.

Eydis sat as if she were relaxing on the bench. Her left arm was draped along the back of the bench to support her as she read an unknown book, the pages cast in the same gold as she.

Rhydian was right when he said she wasn't a statue. It was as though someone had taken her and painted her with gold leaf. The details of her were so fine I could differentiate every pore, every eyelash, every strand of hair that was braided over her shoulder.

Even the fabric of her clothes was unlike any gold statue I'd ever seen. Only her eyes appeared statuesque. They were solid gold.

My "husband" didn't stop me when I moved to touch her. Her right hand rested on her leg as if she had been holding someone's hand right before.

She was cold to the touch.

I withdrew my hand and found Rhydian still staring at me. With hurried steps, I sat beside him and grasped his hands in mine. "Who did it, why did they do it? Lily told me she died because of a flu that spread through the train."

He released a breath slowly, as if he'd been holding it for some time. "The flu didn't take her, another illness did. She'd suffered from it for a while. Ever since she killed the assassin for Filora. She survived Lily's birth but she knew she didn't have long left to live. But stubbornness is an Imaris character trait, and she didn't want to leave."

I could feel the ache in Rhydian's chest as if it were my own. His taint could hide and shield a lot, but it couldn't hide his pain. "She chose this," I said at the realisation.

His thumb rubbed circles on my hand, tracing the lines of my palm. "She said she wanted to watch over us, Lily and I, and she wasn't ready to die. So she asked Jordry to transfigure her."

Rhydian and Jordry were the same age, which meant Jordry was ten when he turned Eydis into a Liminal.

"But this." I gently ran my other hand through hers where it rested on the bench. "How is this better?" Eydis must have chosen this position for them, to enable her children to hold their mother's hand should they want to.

Rhydian's hand stopped its motions, his voice barely above a whisper. "She's still alive."

There was next to nothing on Liminals in the Celestial Library. One was more likely to find them as a mention in an appendix than find a book on them. The only information was common knowledge, and it was limited.

Liminals only occur when an Alchemist transmutes a living organism into their element.

They were alive. Their regular heartbeats were thousands of years of proof in that regard.

And lastly, the reason Rhydian's face was wracked with sorrow. The process was irreversible. Not even the Alchemist who cast them could undo the change.

It was because of that fact no one even knew if Liminals were conscious.

Then realisation stuck. "You want me to see if she is still in there."

Rhydian hadn't shielded himself from me since Gerhold Hall, so though I knew it would be easier for him, he didn't hide the spike in his pulse. But he doesn't answer either. And I got the distinct scent of shame from him, as though the idea of asking me for help, using my blessing for himself was selfish.

I brought his hand to my lips in a quick reassuring kiss and then I stood and tried to speak with the literal uncrowned Queen of Kensilla.

I'd always been able to project my thoughts into another's mind, and I'd gotten better at it over the years because of Tiny. Being afraid to speak Gods' Tongue had allowed me to hone this skill instead which was how I learned to do what I'd done in the fight pit. I never knew how or why I had this trait. I didn't know the man who had aided my parents in having me during Lesan, and since my mother's blessing was not twisted the way mine was, I'd always assumed I'd taken after him. Most days I hated my blessing. But the way Rhydian was looking at me, as though I held the sun in my hands. Right now it had never felt more like a blessing.

Locating that place in the mind where thoughts dwelled was instinctual for me, I'd wandered the path so often that were I blindfolded I would still know it. But when I reached the place where her voice should be, I found only silence.

It was as if I were walking through the train. There were items strewn on bunks and clothes draped over chairs, and *The Kitchen* smelled like freshly baked bread, but every passage I walked through, every carriage I entered, I entered alone. It was a ghost train. If Eydis was in there, she stood behind a door I could not find.



"It was worth a try," Rhydian said when I apologised for not being able to help him. I kissed away the tear that fell upon his cheek. "What do you think she would say to you right now if she could hear you?"

He remained silent for a moment, his fingers absentmindedly roving in circles over my hands. And then I see it, the words forming in his eyes, as though Eydis herself had spoken them to him on the scent of the wildflowers. The corners of his mouth perked up.

"Wife, shall we go for a walk?"



"Explain it to me one more time," I said to Rhydian as I stared at the wall of flashing lights before me. There was a box that looked similar to the one in the vehicle that took us to Gerhold in the right panel, a green map displayed on it that had a red dot moving across it. Rhydian called that one the 'tracking map'. The panel on the left had row after row of flashing lights that bore no pattern that if one looked at it for too long it was likely to give you a headache. In the centre was what looked like one of those electronic tablets I'd seen the Slavers holding. Only this one was built into the box.

"This is *The Control Room*, it keeps the train running," Rhydian said, waving his arms about like one of those big tent showmen who would come into the city once a year with their exotic menageries.

"And we control the train, not Kensilla?" I questioned.

"Yes. Kensilla runs the stations and the Lobby, but we make sure the train keeps running."

He didn't repeat the part where he explained the Imaris bloodline was banished aboard the rail by the Kensillan Republic's Venerable Council, and how they had to commit various forms of familicide to keep the rail moving. Or that fifty other pairs of survivors from the

Kensillan nobility were sent here with them forming the first group of prisoners of the Kensillan Territory Rail.

"We run the train from here?" I pointed to a series of switches and buttons beneath the 'tracking map' adding, "But we never stop it."

Rhydian nodded slowly. "Because?"

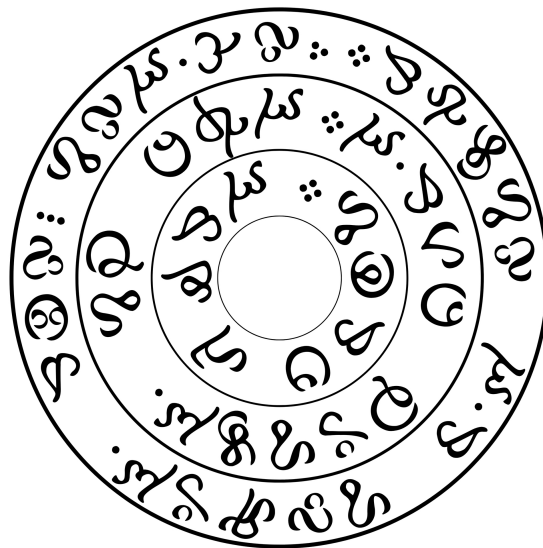
I took a deep breath and then repeated the worst part of this whole thing. The collars were rigged. Not only were they all bonded to the train like the Imaris collar, but they also locked onto the stations, binding the passengers' collars to the station platforms, and their boundaries.

I wandered over, running my hands over the cold metal of the wall. "But now you think you have a way to change that?"

"Thanks to you."

I spun around at his words. "What did I do?"

"Aside from the fact you're immune to Void traps." Rhydian approached the tech, pressed a few buttons and made what he called a hologram appear in the air. The image it displayed was the series of symbols that the pitmaster had shown me when he'd tried to remove my collar.



"You can read Gods' Tongue as well as speak it," Rhydian finally answered.

It wasn't something I was proud of. I understood the language without wanting to, could speak the language without ever having

been taught, and was feared for it by no fault of my own except that I was cursed to be born a T'eiryash. Gods' Tongue was taboo for the simple fact it belonged to the gods. Whether one worshipped a pantheon or not, the continental consensus was the language was not meant for human tongues, hence why many T'eiryashta often found themselves without one.

I stepped closer to the holographic just as Rhydian asked if the symbols were numerical in nature. "No. They're words."

"Like the carving in the temple?"

"No. That inscription was complete. These words are...unfinished." There were dozens of syllables missing from the text, making the entire piece illegible. So many in fact, that I could only discern one word. I pointed to it.

"This word is *muun*. It means truly. The rest are nonsense."

Rhydian nodded his head as if he expected or even suspected this to be the case. "We believe it's part of the code for the rail's collars. About a year ago we located the factory where our collars were made, where they are still being made. According to our intelligence, that code is used during the manufacturing of the collars, and it is housed on site. But we can't get to it on account of the Void traps."

"Which is where I come in." I paused, another thought occurring. "But if you haven't been inside, how do you know the code is there?"

Rhydian moved back over to the tech box and shut it down, the holographic image vanishing in a snap. When he turned back around, his entire demeanour had changed. He was almost apologetic as he answered. "The buyer."

*My buyer*, he meant.

Rhydian ran a hand through his hair nervously. "They wanted a female Brute, white hair, twenty-one years of age. And I'd find the one they wanted in Keltjar." He left out the part about mistaking Kris for me.

"And in exchange," he continued, "they would provide me with the codes we could not get."

I wanted to make a joke about why the only reason I was still around was because he had fallen in love with the package, or that he only wanted me for my brain, but it felt in bad taste considering

how earnest he was being with me. So I kept my mouth shut and let him continue.

"If we can get the codes, and put them in that consul." He pointed to the glass tech box in the middle of the wall. "The collars would all just drop off."

"You hope."

He closed the gap between us, his arms wrapping around my waist to pull me close. "Fools hope is better than no hope."

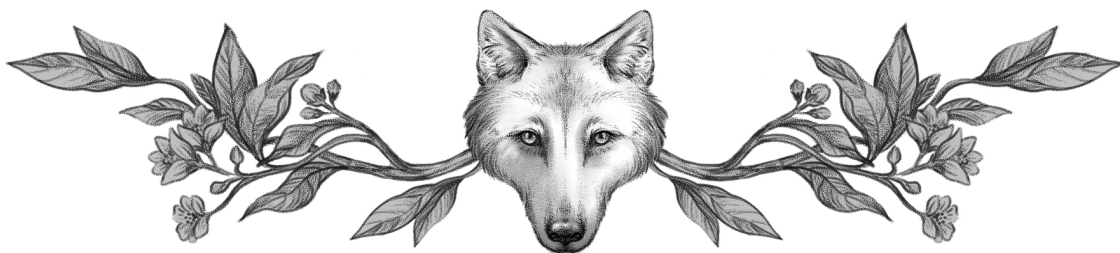
Breathing in his scent, I closed my eyes and spoke in warning. "Fools hope gets people killed, Rhydian."

I felt his lips kiss my hair. "Then we don't die."

"That simple huh?" I breathed into his chest.

"That simple."

*But nothing is ever simple.*



## RIEKA

The mission to the Old Capital hit a snag. On the night we were to leave, eighty-five passengers were drawn for a Hunt there. I was one of them.

Rhydian assured me that it didn't matter. The factory was within the station boundary. I could still join the Runners on the mission. But Hentirion and Farox had also been drawn for the Hunt, and I refused to abandon them without letting them or the rest of my bunkmates know why. I made Rhydian tell them the truth, about where I needed to go during the Hunt.

It didn't seem to surprise any of my bunkmates. "It explains why you kept disappearing for days," Farox said, unaffected by the news I was helping the Runners due to my T'eiryash traits. Hentirion immediately requested details as to how he himself might be of help, hoping his training in the Haltian Fire Infantry might be of benefit. And Saska vanished only to reappear ten minutes later kitted out with a backpack and the Hunter's armour he'd acquired. He volunteered for the mission. Rhydian explained the risks. Saska simply started sharpening his knives.

The Old Capital Hunt was held exactly where it sounded. In the Old Capital, the location of the Marian 1<sup>st</sup> Massacre, and the home

of Rhydian's family house. The Royal House of Imaris, former kings of Kensilla. Rhydian said it was now nothing more than a concrete battleground full of Rabids and traps.

When Hentirion, Farox, and I deboarded the train with the other passengers, we did find concrete. But there were no traps, no Rabids, and no Hunters. Rhydian had warned us that this station Hunt was different. The Hunters who participated in the Old Capital did so because they liked to play games. They were like the one I killed. Purists. They chose one passenger to kill and they were unrelenting in their pursuit.

Rhydian had provided us with a map of the landscape which Hentirion had memorised. We would meet the Runners where Rhydian had indicated on the map and go on to the factory from there.

It was surreal how much the city reminded me of Aronbok. But where the capital of Deos was brimming with life, the Old Capital was a ghost town, an echo of a world long gone. Dilapidated buildings, overgrown plants crawling up walls and out windows, abandoned vehicles on the road, yet everything was still intact. The power was still running. The streetlights were still on.

It was as if everyone had just abandoned it. Just woke up one morning and left. The hairs on my arms stand on end at the thought.

We ran through dozens of those streets. Screams of Blessed echoed off through the cold barren landscape providing us enough evidence that the danger was just hiding. I kept my senses on alert, Farox with his eyes, and we followed Hentirion.

After running for thirty minutes, no Hunter in sight we finally turned the corner to the building where we were to meet the Runners. It was then, with only two hundred meters between us and the doorway to the underground tunnels when one of the gods of luck decided to withdraw their favour.

Farox swore under his breath. A row of Brutes blocked our path. At least two dozen were leashed to a cable that ran from one building to the other. I thought we might have stumbled upon a Hunter's captives but the moment I took a step forward, the Brutes instantly

grew aggressive. Growling and howling, they ripped and clawed at the air.

### *Rabids*

"A little overkill, isn't it," Farox mused, his tone attempting to hide his fear.

Hentirion shifted beside. "They're showmen. How we die doesn't matter, just that we do. They are awarded for the collars they claim."

### *Always the Fucking collars!*

A voice cut through the wild creature's feverish cries, their words Kensillan. "A woman, a Drake and an old man."

I looked up and saw a Hunter standing in the window frame of the windowless building ahead. "This should be quick."

We didn't even have time to react. There was the whistle as the dart pierced the air and then the sharp pain as the tip pierced my calf.

Farox hissed as he pulled out the dart. His eyes, a very humanly brown stared violently up at the Hunter as his body was forced to return to its human state, his scales; his armour now forbidden to him.

Hentirion placed himself between us and the Rabids. "It was only a matter of time before they figured out how to inject us with the vapour."

"We're in a godsdamned Void trap," Farox fumed.

The Hunter raised his hand, a device held within.

It wasn't just a Void trap, it was a kill pit.

We tried to bolt, but we didn't make it ten feet before two more Hunters on horseback emerged to block our escape. One drew a sword, the other a bow and arrow.

"THEY ARE MINE!" shouted the first Hunter.

A cackle erupted from the swordsman. "KILL SHOT CLAIMS!" He raised his sword and rode towards Farox. He ducked fast, only narrowly avoiding the Hunter's blade.

Even in its liquid form, I was still free from the effects of the Void vapour, so I spun around to face the Rabids. However it worked, my growl might just be enough to scare the wild creatures into submission so we could have a chance to escape.

I took a step forward to attack only for Hentirion to grab my wrist. "You can't risk it. There are too many."

There was a click and the leashes keeping the Rabids at bay snapped open. The creatures charged us, their mouths open in slobbering snarls, their eye bloodshot and fixated on us.

The other Hunters screamed in anger and the archer drew back on his bowstring and aimed at me.

Heat scorched the air. A whip of flame erupted before me and lashed out at the arrow turning it to cinders.

The horses reared up as flames struck their riders. I spun around and found a wall of fire preventing the Rabids from getting any closer, and standing before it, unaffected by the Void trap, hands engulfed in flame was Hentirion.

The realisation struck me hard and fast. I didn't know whether to hug him or scream at him for not telling me.

*"The T'eiryash in your story,"* I said, reaching out to him with my inner voice. *"It was you."*

Hentirion drew his gaze away from the Hunters, the whipping flames moving as if of their own accord, striking the Hunters from the horses. Hentirion's eyes had changed, no longer were they the amber brown I'd come to know. They shone a burning gold.

***"I have searched decades for someone like me,"*** his inner voice lamented. ***"I will not lose the only family I have ever called my own."*** I felt Farox flinch beside me when Hentirion spoke to us both. ***"Don't move."***

I took Farox's hand in mine and watched in awe as Hentirion's entire body erupted into flame. And it grew. The flames burned hotter and hotter, the man within them vanishing, becoming flame itself.

Farox cried out in anguish beside me, his body instinctively trying to rush to our companion. But I held him in place as the flames intensified, the heat burning my eyes.

We huddled close to the ground as every inch of the alley was engulfed in sentient fire, incinerating everything in its path.

It was over in a matter of seconds. I opened my eyes and found we were sitting in the only untouched part of the street. Everything



around us was gone. Black snow dusted the air as the buildings crumbled down around us.

"HENTIRION!" Farox cried beside me, rushing to his feet. I spun around to see Farox crash to his knees before a blackened figure on the ground. It was Hentirion, clothes and hair burned away, skin blackened with soot. But he was alive.

I knelt to help him, but Farox objected. "You have to go Rieka. Find Rhydian. Get the code. I'll take care of Hentirion."

I wanted to object, but I knew he was right. I hugged him, praying to the Eldertides to protect them both and fled the devastation of the street.

Down the street, I found one of the Hunter's horses unscathed. I mounted it and rode through the city, praying that Rhydian hadn't been beneath us.



The Old Capital had hundreds of tunnels built beneath it that citizens used to use for public transportation, back when trains were used as such. The tunnel I was supposed to go through before Hentirion erupted was beneath those destroyed buildings. So I'd had to ride through the city and locate a new entrance.

I found one an hour later in the middle of an overgrown park. I left the horse there and headed into the tunnels in the hopes I would be able to find Rhydian.

The factory was in the northern part of the city, so I headed down into the tunnels, hoping I would find some method for navigating the tunnels.

It took my eyes a minute to adjust, and when they did I saw the signs on the walls. Names and arrows. More searching led me to a list of names of the areas of the city. I searched for the one where the factory was, thankful Eleen had told me to memorise the name

in case I got lost in the tunnels. However, I doubt this is the type of 'lost' she had in mind. I eventually found the location and a map of the tunnels. I matched the factory area name to one of the tunnels and began my long walk through the dark.

I travelled three miles before I scented someone I never thought I would be happy to meet.

"*Wade?*" I called out with my inner voice, having been warned during the mission briefings that Rabids often bedded down in these tunnels.

***"Rieka, oh steady, you're alive. We felt the explosion. Are you ok, where are Hentirion and Farox, are they with you?"***

I followed his scent as I tried to contain my surprise. "*Have you always been this chatty?*"

Wade's inner voice chuckled. ***"Since birth. You were probably too busy sending me scathing death stares to notice."***

"*Fair enough.*" Wade may still be banished from the train, but that didn't stop him from helping with the mission.

I continued my walk through the dark until the scent of blood halted me entirely. "*Wade, who is injured?*"

***"We had a bit of a scuffle earlier. The explosion sent Rabids running through the tunnels."***

I quickened my pace at the realisation the blood could be Rhydian's. "*Oh gods, Rhydian, Saska are they...*"

***"Saska's fine..."*** I could hear the smile in the man's voice. ***"Rhydian took the brunt of it, but he's only got a few scrapes, nothing Sal can't heal when we get back."***

That was good. Wade didn't think it was a major injury, which meant Rhydian's blessing was likely to heal any wound before we ever got back to the train. Probably before the factory. I sighed in relief.

The tunnel began to brighten, up ahead someone was using a Bright-light. I let my eyes adjust to the change and was greeted by the relieved faces of ten Runners.

No, eleven.

"*Jae, what are you doing here?*" I asked as I greeted the raven-haired man.

***"Oh. that is such an odd feeling. Like talking to myself, only I'm talking to you."*** Jae made a face that looked like he was trying to get water out of his ear. ***"Rhydian needed another human for the guns. Kensillan weapons are species-coded, so Devos can't touch them."***

Correction. Rhydian needed a human since Jae and I both knew Rhydian wasn't one. Jae shouldn't be here. He's about to be a father.

***"I know what you're going to say, but I don't care. I'm with Rhydian on this. My son is not going to be born a prisoner."***

Mal, fully manifested into his Bear-Blessed state grumbled under his breath a few feet away. I felt his thoughts a few seconds later, his inner voice much deeper in this form. *"We need to get moving. We're behind schedule."*

As per my job on this mission, I kept my opinion on Jae to myself and I passed on Mal's message. Immediately all the Runners moved into formation. Mal remained at the rear, the three flyers, Si'mon, Anika and Amida took up shield positions on the left. Jordry, Eleen and Oric, the Kindling with the birthmark, and who I suspected was in some kind of relationship with Eleen took positions on the right. Wade and Rhydian were to lead, leaving Jae with his guns and Saksa with his knives to protect me in the centre since the mission hinged on my survival to the factory.

Rhydian, who'd been sitting on the platform, hopped off at my approach and winced.

*"Where are you hurt?"* I demanded to know, touching him when he came within arms reach. I moved to examine him when he stopped me, taking my hand in his. ***"I am fine, Rieka. It just nicked me."***

***"Are Hentirion and Farox alive?"*** Saskia had silently approached from behind Rhydian, the sundered Slyph deathly silent. Rhydian ran a hand down my arm as if to reassure me he was indeed fine. He then departed for the others to leave me with my bunkmate.

I quickly explained to Saskia what happened, of which none of the details remotely surprised the Pazgari. His only response was, "I

always thought it was weird I liked the old Kindling. Now I know why."

We were quickly corralled into formation and headed back out into the dark.

We walked for three miles where the only definable feature of the tunnel was the train tracks. Nothing grew down here but mould and mushrooms. And rats. Lots of rats. We travelled across three underground platforms, through two more train tunnels and a long passage through the underground space with the train and city maps.

We surfaced near what appeared to be a large crossroad surrounded by tall buildings. Much taller than the ones I'd seen earlier, and in far worse a state. Pieces were missing from these buildings, some of those pieces littered the pavement around the base of the buildings.

***"Are you ok? You're heart rate is elevated,"*** Rhydian's voice sounded gently in my head.

I swallowed nervously, my eyes darting from window to window as if I expected to see another face staring back down at me from one of them. The glow from the still-powered neon signs cast the city a terrifying shade of red and blue.

I took a few steps towards a window. A mannequin like the ones I'd seen in the dressmakers in Aronbok stood behind the glass in an emerald green dress. If I stood at just the right angle, it looked as if I myself was wearing the garment. A spectral of a life that might have been.

The light suddenly flickered and when I looked up at the source, a shiver coursed through my body. A moth had flown right into the neon sign over the shop door.

A tight knot began to coil in my stomach.

All Deogns know moths are the only creatures known to traverse both Terra and The Dark Sphere. That is why they are seen as an omen.

Lightning flashed in the distance, tightening the knot further.

I sought out Rhydian's hand and squeezed it. *"Let's get going. There's a storm coming."*

We ran the mile from the old city square to what the Runners called the warehouse district where the factory was.

According to Lex, who was the one who first discovered the factory on his reconnaissance missions, the lowest of ranking Thralls worked here during the day. At night they were all corralled into a transport truck and moved to barracks several miles down the road to sleep before being returned early in the morning in the same transport to begin working again. Which meant it was currently empty.

The Thralls who worked within the walls of the factory were inhibited from using their blessings on account of the Void traps that scattered the perimeter. Which meant there was no security. Even the surrounding area had been cleared by Saska and Jae for any signs of a Blessed who might scent or hear us.

I stared at the gates of the factory in abject terror. I was actually, voluntarily walking into a death trap, after barely surviving the last one.

I turned to Rhydian, his own features were a mask of concentration. He was damn lucky I loved him. I took his face in my hands and kissed him.

***"What was that for?"***

*"Luck."* I took a deep breath and returned my gaze to the fence line where Si'mon was already waiting for me. He looked just as anxious as I was, even his wings fidgeted nervously behind him.

He offered me his hand. The moment I took it he swept me into his arms and launched us into the air.

The factory loomed out below, a great industrial achievement of the Republic. The very air we flew through buzzed with power, scenting it a steely copper.

Rhydian had scrapped the plan months before I arrived because they'd discovered the factory was protected by Void traps. Even without the security, breaking in without the use of their taints, and being unable to detect threats from the outside was suicide. Even being what I was, from the air I could only smell the factory itself and not the traces of those who worked within. There was no telling what the Runners would have faced if they'd tried this earlier.

"You ready?" Si'mon asked shifting me in his arms. The moment I said yes, he dropped me. It was intentional of course. He was the only person who could even get close, so it fell to him to get me inside the factory fence line.

I fell into a roll to soften the landing, and froze, allowing my senses to acclimate to the environment. To listen for anyone that shouldn't be here.

The scents of hundreds of Blessed engulfed me. Their presence imprinted on this place like a painting. But that was all they were, remnants.

I was alone.

Inside the perimeter, I would be able to roam freely, but without the other Runners, I'd never be able to get the codes. At least as far as Rhydian knew. So now my job was to locate and destroy the traps. We were lucky Lex was such a brilliant spy.

I'd memorised the layout of the facility from Rhydian's blueprints. Within the fence line were three buildings, a mess hall, a guard tower which currently stood vacant, and the factory, the largest of the buildings. But the traps weren't in any of those. Along each perimeter, standing at roughly thirty feet each were the largest Bright-lights I'd ever seen.

According to Lex's intelligence, that was where I would find the Void traps. "There might be other's," he had said. "The Thralls seemed to avoid them."

Twelve. There were twelve lamp posts in total, including the ones on the other side of the factory.

"*Wade are you ready?*" my inner voice called out to the Pneumatic.

He responded a moment later. ***"I'm in place. I should be able to maintain the barrier for twenty minutes. That should be long enough."***

I sent a silent prayer to the Eldertides that it would be, and I ran over to the nearest post.

"STEP AWAY FROM THE LAMP!" came a voice from inside the post.

My heart leapt into my throat, I'd never unsheathed my dagger so fast. Crouched low, with my eyes on the post, I called out to Rhydian, "*Did you hear that?*"

***"No. It's silent on our end,"*** his inner voice assured me.

I swallowed my nerves and moved closer. The voice repeated itself. "STEP AWAY FROM THE LAMP, AND GET BACK TO WORK!" Relief flooded me.

*It's a recording.*

I closed the distance to the post, ignoring the woman's voice, and noticed a hissing sound coming from inside the post. I found the panel Lex had claimed would be here and opened it.

Inside I found two canisters, larger versions of those I'd destroyed in the military medical compound. They were attached to a series of pipes that ran up and into the posts. On closer inspection I found a word inscribed on the surface of each canister. The left said *Vyamash*, the Gods' Tongue word for Charmer, and on the right the script said *Khurma*, meaning Void.

The posts were being used to house and disperse. That's what the hissing sound was. The device releasing Toxicant vapours into the air. Void vapour to inhibit the Thralls and the Charmer pheromones to prevent them from trying to free themselves. And the gods had used their own language to ensure not even their servants knew what they were handling.

I reached in and after a minute of tugging and twisting, the Void canister came loose. When nothing happened. I removed the other.

*One down, eleven to go.*

I tucked the cannisters into the pack slung over my shoulder and ran to the next post, each one instructing me to step away and go back to work. I managed to remove all the canisters with five minutes to spare.

When I held the last canister in my hands, Si'mon swooped down and landed before me.

"Is that all of them?" he asked, staring at the pack with interest.

I handed it to him with a nod. He departed with it without a second thought, heading to where Oric was so the Kindling could burn them.

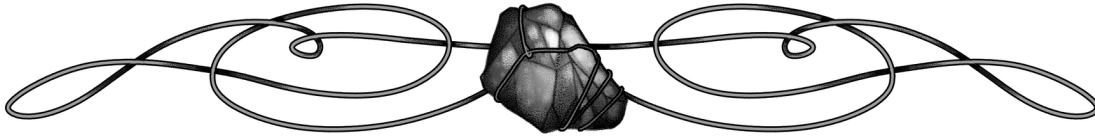
A gust of wind pushed at the back of my neck, and I turned to see Anika land, and behind her floating down on the air was Wade.

Steel creaked to my right. The entry gate opened, and Rhydian, wearing an arrogant smile, jogged in at an almost lazy pace.

"What is so amusing?"

He leaned down to kiss me, quick and chaste. ***"Are you sure you've never broken into a high-valued target before?"***





## RHYDIAN

The safe was in the factory manager's office. According to my source, they had to put the code in manually with every new batch of collars. For that reason, the manager kept them close and personally oversaw the implementation of the codes into the manufacturing process.

So, whilst the others took up defensive watch on the perimeter, Jordry and I entered the factory with Rieka. It wasn't that she was necessary for this part of the mission, not unless we were wrong about there not being any traps inside the building, I just felt calmer knowing where she was.

The inside of the factory was silent. Nothing but dead conveyor belts and sleeping worker stations. I tried to ignore the way my body reacted to the sight of the collars in the crates in the far corner. There were at least a hundred of them in the top crate alone, all carefully ordered and arranged in neat rows. I shut my eyes as I looked away, concentrating on my feet as we rose up the stairs to the landing of the manager's office.

The door was unlocked. This told me one thing about these people, they believed they were invincible. Inside the room was like any other office. A desk in the centre with an overbearing armchair, numerous filing cabinets by one wall, and a long window to stare out

at the factory floor along the other. The only thing that stood out was the safe. The two-by-two box was fitted into the floor of the office with a bio-organic scanner built into the door that prohibited anyone other than those authorized from accessing it.

Jordry immediately went to his knees. His hands hovered over the surface of the small door trying to locate the weakest part of the metal. The twitch in his expression told me he had found it. Rieka stepped close to me and watched as the Alchemist placed his hand on the surface of the door. I heard his heart rate elevate as he began to change the safe casing, turning the frame from steel to gold. Once he had accomplished that, he then caused it to turn into its liquid state and pour into the cavity where the safe frame had just been.

The molten liquid hardened and when he withdrew his hand, he held a piece of metal, a shiny iridescent silver disk.

"Can I see that?" Rieka said, looking at the object from over my shoulder. Jordry handed it to her. As she flipped it in her hands, running her fingers over the embossed surface she said, "It is definitely Gods' Tongue. The pattern matches the one in *The Control Room*." I forced my relief back down, buried it until we were back on the train.

"Are you sure?" Jordry asked her, returning to his feet.

Rieka seemed to hesitate before answering. "It looks almost identical to the one on the train." She pointed to the circles carved into the metal surface. "But it isn't missing any characters. This script is complete."

"So we have it?" Jordry questioned, his tone teetering on the edge of astonishment.

"Yes. I believe you do." She nodded, staring at the metal plate in her hand in utter disbelief.

"Rieka," I stepped towards her and cupped her face in my hands, drawing her eyes from the Gods' Tongue to look me in mine. "This is it. This is freedom."

"Freedom," she said as her eyes began to well with tears. Her head suddenly snapped towards the window, her eyes wide. "They're coming!"

We made it as far as the courtyard, rain pissing down on top of us when a siren sounded. The night sky above us lit up with the spotlights of the Kensillan Aerial Core.

"YOU ARE SURROUNDED!" someone, likely their commander announced. "SURRENDER YOURSELF TO THE MERCY OF THE CORE AND YOU SHALL LEAVE HERE WITH YOUR LIVES."

Rieka, still beside me, squeezed my hand.

I looked up at the leader's craft, and knowing that they would all be able to see me, I raise my hand in the air and invited them all to go and fuck their mothers.

"NOW!" I shouted.

The hovercraft at the far end suddenly collided with the one beside it as the air around us whistled, knocking it out of the sky. Below it, hiding behind a vehicle, Eleen jumped up and flung her hands back. The movement of the rain shifted, collecting into a single stream, a river in the sky. She slapped at the air and the river whipped out at the next hovercraft, crushing it like tinfoil.

The commotion allowed us to run for the fence line as Jae, having secured weapons in the security office, fired on the crafts to provide us cover.

I pulled the pin from my hair and looked at Rieka.

"*Are you sure?*" she asked, knowing it wasn't just my secret to tell. But I had no choice, not here. Even if it meant my friends finally learned the truth, I had to help if I could help. When Rieka released my hand, I sliced into my forearm. My body immediately cried out from the pain of the cut, my taint forcing any trace of Jae's blood out of me.

My blood ran from my arm like a serpent, coiling around my wrist until it pooled in the palm of my hand where it crystalised and lengthened into a crimson blade. The moment the blade had solidified, a shadow passed over the path before us and Rieka was ripped into the air. Her scream pierced the night and I watched in terror as she was flown upward. I knew what the Sky Hawk was going to do.

Dread filled me as Jordry pulled me for cover, his focus momentarily caught on the blade in my hand.

The moment I found Rieka in the sky, the Sky Hawk dropped her.

Her blood-curdling scream tore through my soul, ripping it from my body. I ran expecting to find her broken and lifeless on the ground. But when I reached the spot where she should have been, Rieka wasn't there.

Mechanical whirring twittered above me and I looked up to see a creature made of metal carrying her.

No. Not creature. Saska with a pair of metal wings fluttering on his back. The predator in her smiled down at me as she mouthed something to her saviour, and an equally terrifying smile appeared on his. Turning in the air he targeted the nearest hovercraft and threw Rieka at it. She landed atop the craft, rolling into a crouched position and then in a move so fast I only saw the after-effect, she'd smashed her arm through the window and had pulled the pilot right out.

Even without using her blessing, she was glorious.

As the craft fell, the pilot's body discarded in the fall, Saska caught her again just long enough to drop her safely to the floor where she fell into a roll and disappeared into the chaos of the factory.

All around us dozens of Sky Hawks dove and swooped, each one linked to a hovercraft, forcing the Devo who wore the collar to obey their commands.

A high-pitched shriek pierced the night when a six-foot-tall Talon with a wing span of at least fourteen feet flapped in the air a few meters above me, the collar around its neck aglow.

Water struck out at it, the tether that connected it to the pilot flashing through the air like blue lightning. The wing Eelen had struck snapped sending the Talon crashing to the ground.

A second Talon launched at Eelen.

Blood misted the air as a bullet shot through the Talon's head and his body dropped to the floor landing in a crumpled feathered heap at her feet. She gave Jae a quick glance in thanks and ran through a wall of fire that opened for her entry.

All around us, the Runners were fighting, striking at the hovercrafts and the brainwashed Devos who obeyed their commands in a desperate attempt to preserve their lives. The soldiers hadn't

expected us to be able to react so quickly with our taints. They likely had not expected the traps to have been destroyed, but the surprise would only last for a short time before they regrouped.

We needed to strike hard and fast. A well-oiled machine, the Runners fell into a familiar pattern, partnering up and targeting the closet enemy.

Jordry, the marksman that he was, drew the bow that was strapped to his back and began shooting at the aerial threats alongside Jae.

Across the yard, skidding in the dirt, Oric and Eleen came to a stop in front of a group of metal drums as Wade shielded them with a wall of solid air. They began pulling the lids off systematically. One after the other, thick black ribbons rose into the air like dancing serpents as Eleen wielded the fuel within, indicating to any Kensillan who saw her that she wasn't any ordinary Current. Oric ignited them all. Tendrils of fire whipped through the air, striking at the crafts forcing the Sky Hawks to defend their pilots, leaving openings for Si'mon and Amida to attack. Anika with her light-manipulating wings, appeared and disappeared in the air as she used the spotlights of the crafts to vanish and sneak up on her targets, killing them before they knew she was even there.

With every hovercraft brought to the ground, three soldiers would emerge wielding Kensillan blast weapons.

When I found my target, I ran. They hadn't seen me before the blade sliced through their neck. The next one lost an arm before my blade impaled in their chest. Another received my mother's pin through the eye before being gutted.

I tried to keep my eye on Rieka, but she moved so fast, the predator in her more alert and aware than any I'd ever encountered. For every one of the enemy who met death by my blood, three had met it by her dagger. Black-handled Etrina was feasting tonight.

Talons fell to their deaths covered in burning oil, others were shot through with arrows. The unlucky ones faced an agonising death coated in the acid Amida spat if Jae didn't shoot them first. Whenever a soldier attempted to find a weapon they were crushed to death by Wade's concussion wave.

The air was saturated in the enemy's blood by the time the last hovercraft had fallen to the ground. Not a single Sky Hawk had been left alive.

We'd survived.

"That was only the first wave," Malden saw fit to remind us when we all regrouped. Everyone was intact, a few cuts and bruises but we were all alive. No one said a thing about the blood-made blade in my hand. Though I didn't doubt they would in time.

Oric took that as his signal and he ran back through the rain towards the factory doors and disappeared inside. A moment later smoke began to billow out, a red glow tinting the upper windows. We were going to burn this place to the ground.

Rieka walked up beside me, blood smeared on the leg of her pants as if she had wiped her hands on them, the hands that were now shaking slightly. I took one into mine and kissed it. The smile she gave me was intoxicatingly beautiful.

Behind us, an engine rumbled to life. From the driver's seat, Jae looked up and smiled. He'd found us our ride home.

A wave of heat shot between Rieka and me.

Jae coughed, his smile vanishing as blood seeped from his mouth and he looked down to where the burn from a Kensillan blast weapon had struck him in the chest. He collapsed against the steering wheel.

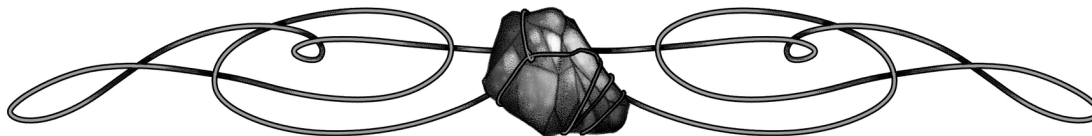
"NO!" I whipped around and found the surviving soldier several meters away, the now empty weapon in his hands. Within seconds I'd found his heart and called on his blood. Clots formed; vessels burst. All colour drained from his face as the walls of his heart ruptured. He clutched at his chest as his legs fell out from under him. Another second passed. The soldier was dead.

I rushed over to the body, desperate to know why I hadn't detected him. I rolled him over and found the small flat canister clipped onto the belt across his chest. They were kitting their soldiers up with Void vapour.

My body collapsed onto the ground, my blade now nothing but broken shards in the dirt.

I closed my eyes, hoping, praying for my taint to be wrong now too. But knew it wasn't. Jae's blood was silent.

Because Jae was dead.



## RHYDIAN

I was greeted by Lily's smiling face the moment I walked into *MedCom*. She had that pregnancy glow. So it was only right I cursed myself for being the reason it vanished. I expected her to crumble when I spoke the words. When I told her Jae was dead. But she didn't. Not until she saw his body lying in their bed where I placed him upon our return.

Her wails of anguish could be heard in every carriage.

"It is not your fault Rhydian," my grandfather said squeezing my shoulder in an attempt to console me, trying to halt the guilt he knew I felt. "Veliah claims us all in the end."

But it didn't matter what anyone said. I'd seen it in my mother when my father died. And again right before Jordry had turned her. No words of comfort would ever dull that kind of grief.

I felt the familiar and comforting beat of a heart and turned to find Rieka entering the control room accompanied by Saska and his partner Emil. They'd all spent the day in *MedCom* with the rest of their bunkmates.

Hentirion had suffered what Preans called The Torpor. A result of a Kindling exerting so much heat that their body must shut down to recover and heal. Sal had assured everyone that he would be fine, and that he would wake up when his body was ready.



Farox on the other hand, in the course of trying to get the old man back to the safety of the station had been cornered by two hunters who favoured one-on-one combat with their prey. The Torvian had killed them both but his ankle was broken, his facial membrane was ripped open when his jaw was dislocated, and his arm had been internally severed from the joint. Yet somehow, he'd managed to obtain two supply caches and remain conscious long enough to drag the old Kindling scholar across half the city and to the safety of the station.

The only reason Rieka wasn't there now was because of the code.

The moment she saw me she pushed right through the crowd and pulled me into her arms. I buried my nose in her sweet-scented hair.

"Shall we begin?" my grandfather asked, pulling her attention from me. Rieka glanced at him from over her shoulder, her gaze lingering for a moment before she let distance fall between us. The crowd which had been forming in the carriage for the better part of an hour quickly fell silent as I approached the console, Rieka by my side.

I went through the motions as I had done for years, typing in the sequences of buttons that my ancestors had determined over centuries until I had called up the screen that controlled the passengers' collars.

The keypad appeared before us, the sinuous Gods' Tongue characters spread out in a grid below the incomplete code. I moved my hand towards the keys and hesitated.

Sensing my nerves, Rieka moved up beside me. **"Would you like me to do it?"** her inner voice softly asked.

*"No. I need to do this."* I took a breath and looked at the disk in my hands and compared it to the phrase on the holographic. I found the missing character on the keyboard for the first word, touched it and slid it over to the incomplete word within the circle. The image shifted to accommodate the new character. I did it again for the next set of characters, locating the missing symbol on the keyboard and placing it on the incomplete script. On the eleventh character, Rieka suddenly stopped my hand.

"Not that one. It's the wrong letter." I looked closer at the two characters and realised she was right. There was a single stroke of

difference which made them nearly indistinguishable from one another. I found the correct one and placed it in the circle.

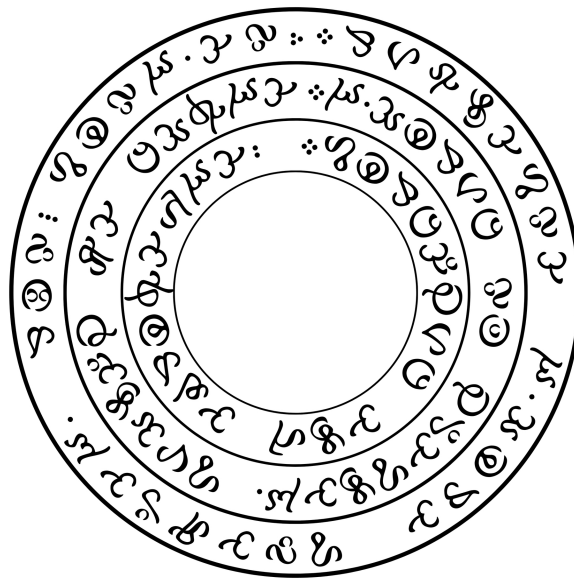
Murmurs started to pick up behind me, but I willed myself to ignore them.

I'd entered nearly as many symbols as were already on the holographic when my hand started to shake.

Rieka pressed herself into my side, her hand moving to rest on my back. I felt myself calm instantly. Three more. Just three. I keyed in the first.

Then the second.

Upon keying the final character, the console beeped, and the circle enlarged, levitating in the air before me. "What does it say?" I asked Rieka as she gazed up at the code.



"It's a riddle." Rieka raised her hand to the holograph and began to rotate the image anti-clockwise. Whether she intended for me to hear or not, as she translated the phrase aloud, her inner voice spoke the Gods' Tongue into my mind.

**"Vimlaagol ark afmishagta,"**—"I am the absence of constraints,"—**"t'eimol nu gyavrat' voeraag kha leshta mohravna t'eima vnakhyat' muun."**—"the ability to choose yet

not all who seek me out can truly have me.”—“**Vint' an?**”—“What am I?”

“Freedom.”

All eyes turned to my grandfather, the word spoken by the senior councilman, by the uncrowned King of Kensilla, stirring the crowd.

I turned to Rieka and asked her to key in the answer. She stepped forward and in a matter of seconds had entered the word. The moment she keyed in the last symbol, a new button appeared. Rieka stepped back and turned her attention to my grandfather.

“Kosha, would you do the honours?”

He closed the distance to the console in long strides, the weight of our burden heavy on his shoulders. He raised his hand and pressed the button that now glowed beneath the riddle. A series of beeps sounded out from the control station, the lights of the panels flashing in quick succession. The Gods’ Tongue characters vanished only to be replaced by Old Kenar text.

*NO!*

My grandfather read the words aloud, his tone solemn.

“Deactivation incomplete. Bio-organic component still required. Please try again.”

The carriage erupted into shouts and outbursts of rage. I squeezed the disk so hard I could feel the metal slicing into my palm.

There had to be something I could do.

I left the control room.

The notes in my office. I had hundreds if not thousands of notes on the Royal Rail. The last king had left hundreds of books in the library about Kensillan technology at the peak of the last monarchical century. There had to be something in there on bio-organic codes.

But no matter where I looked, there was nothing. I could feel my panic begin to set in as I poured over the papers on my desk. My hands shook so violently from anger I could barely read let alone think straight. The office door opened and someone said my name but it wasn’t important, they weren’t important right now. Not as much as this, not as much as freeing them from the train. I had to free them. I had to free her.

"RHYDIAN!"

Hard hands grasped at my face, forcing me to look at the owner. Pale eyes stared at me in fear. Not for their own life but for mine. Haunting eyes that reminded me of the ring around the sun when the moon swallows it, a golden glow around a pale moon.

"Rieka?"

"Yes," she whispered, her thumb stroking my cheek. "Please stop Rhydian. You're going to hurt yourself."

I reached for her face, wiping at the tears that had fallen. "I have wronged you," I told her as my body threatened to break from my control.

Her gaze was searching, unable to comprehend my words. "What are you talking about?"

"In the slave camp. When I told them you were human. I knew they would execute you. And I told them anyway."

I waited for her to drop her hands, to release me. Because I knew that when she did I would lose all sense of being. I was nothing and no one without this cause. It was in my blood, in my mother's blood. My father had died protecting our people all for a chance of one day being free. I had spent my life trying to do the same. I had done what no other person in five centuries on this train had done before. And it still wasn't enough.

"Rhydian." My name left her lips in a whisper. Those grey tempests looked upon me with such love.

*How can she look at me that way?*

I had left her there in the camp after telling the slavers she was human, knowing that they would hang her. I had believed death would be better than the alternative.

And I had the audacity to think I was worthy of her love.

Rieka wasn't the monster. I was.

I opened my mouth to speak but her inner voice silenced me. **"I forgive you."**

Rieka cupped my cheek.

"Why?"

*It makes no sense.*

"Because you will not forgive yourself." Rieka then stepped back and slowly lifted her hands. She seemed to stutter out a breath before—to my utter astonishment—she signed my name in Seja.

"Rhydian, I see you. You are a friend and a brother. You are a son. A leader. You love cold tea and scolding hot kharee. You sing in the shower when you think no one is around and you always lie in our bunk thirty minutes before I do just to make sure the bed isn't cold because you know I like that.

"You would rather skip a meal to ensure someone else eats than eat it yourself. You've never missed a talent show and always volunteer for the children even if you look like an idiot. You regularly risk your life for people who probably don't appreciate it and ask nothing from them in return. You've hidden your true self from your friends for years because you're scared they won't accept or love you for who and what you are. You are a selfless and gentle man. And you made me feel safe when I thought the world incapable of it."

Her hands began to shake as she continued to sign. "Rhydian, if you cannot see your worth then I offer myself. I give you my eyes, so that you may see yourself as I do. I give you my voice so that you will hear every day that you are good, and kind, and loved. I give you my body so that you will know the touch of devotion. And I give you my heart. Because I trust no one else with it. It is yours to do with as you wish.

"You act like you are alone in this cause, but you are not. Share your burdens. Let me bear some of the wei—"

I caught her hands, stilling their movement. My body trembled as her words sunk in, words that voiced a terrifying desire I'd never admitted aloud.

"Where did you come from? You are a trick the gods are playing on me. A figment of my dreams brought to life."

Rieka raised a hand to cup my cheek. "I only know of one god who plays with dreams. And he does not share his creations." Her fingers fell to my lips in a feathered caress.

The words slipped from my tongue. "Tell me you love me?"

Rieka's reaction was instant. Frozen as if the question had commanded the world to stop. A dread fell upon me, anchoring my entire existence to the space between her heartbeats as I waited for her answer. My world started and ended with her, every breath I took was because of her, for her and should she wish it of me, I would stop my heart for her.

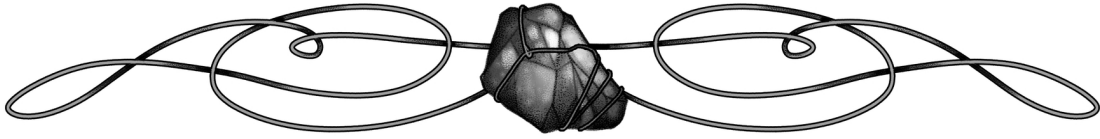
Rieka looked up at me, those tempestuous greys churning. Then she smiled. "You don't ask for much do you?" A small chuckle escaped those beautiful lips. "I hate you, Alistair Rhydian Imaris Kanyk."

Then as if it was the easiest thing in the world after everything we had just been through, she kissed me.

The world faded away until there was nothing left but the sensation of her lips on mine, of her body pressed to mine, of the sound of her heart against mine. Beating with mine. Nothing mattered so long as Rieka was by my side. So long as she loved me, I would never stop fighting for our freedom. For her freedom.

The office door burst open and Eelen skidded to a halt at seeing us. Her expression was one of terror. I immediately knew something was wrong. I begged her to tell me.

"It's Lily. Sal's had to induce labour."

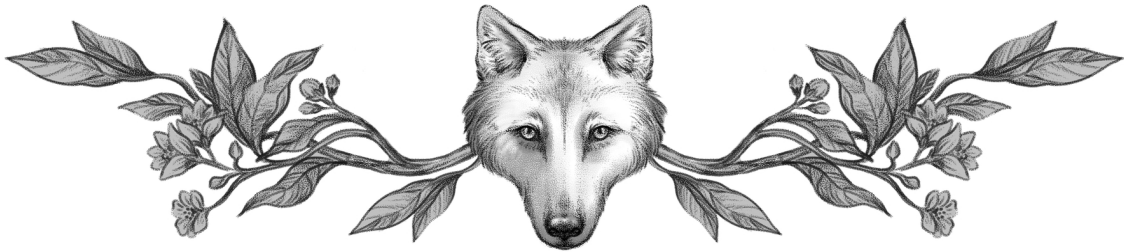


## RHYDIAN

**I**t had been Jae's wish to have a Kanahari death rite performed should he ever be killed.

The day after his son was born, when the train was passing by the Armistice Line once more, I took Jae's body to Krisenya and Taren where for four days they prepared him for the pyre. On the fifth day, I brought Rieka, Lily and my nephew to Gerhold and we burned his body.

And afterwards, when the sun had set and her tears had dried, Lily told Jonah to take her son.



## RIEKA

Rhydian hadn't been the same since we left Henry with Jonah. That was what Lily had called her son, after Rhydian and her father. She had tried to explain her reasonings for leaving him at Gerhold Hall to Rhydian—to be with other children and breath fresh air, to run when no one was chasing him, to live without fighting to survive. Gerhold could give him that. Jonah would see to it. Kris would see to it. Henry was born without a collar, and Lily wanted to keep it that way.

Rhydian didn't object. Henry was Lily's son. She was doing what she believed was best for her child. But he didn't deny that he could see that the alternative was worse. Regardless of Eydis's presence in *The Gardens*, Lily grew up without a mother. Rhydian had not.

He had added Jae's face to his wall of the lost the day we returned. And as if he couldn't break my heart anymore with his grief, the next day there was a black charcoal wolf beside it.

For Tiny. He held me for what seemed like a day as my grief attempted to consume me, stroking my hair, kissing my head whispering words of comfort I could never tell myself. He held me until my tears finally dried and I could smile at my brother's portrait. It would be a rare moment of solitude between us in the weeks to come.



Rhydian turned inward after that day, to his thoughts and his notes, intent more than ever on finding the answer to the other part of the collar code. He didn't cut me out, but he didn't let me in either. I'd theorised what the message on the console had meant—whose bio-organic component was required—but we'd all come to the same conclusion. The gods had designed the collars, so it must not only be their language that unlocked the collars but their cells as well. And we were never getting those.

I even gave the collar I had collected from my first hunt to Emil to see if there was anything he could discover about them, and after seeing the magnificent wings he had built for Saska, I thought it was worth trying. But all he managed to do was burn a hole in *The Engineering Room* floor when his tampering set it off.

The only solution was to find a loophole. I took it upon myself to read everything they had on Gods' Tongue on the train. But after two weeks of scouring every book and note, every scrap of paper on the train on the topic, even an annotation by the first Imaris heir to reside on the train, claiming the gods had desecrated his home to punish his family, I'd found nothing other than a reinvigorated hatred for the gods.

Knowing I couldn't give up, I changed tactics and decided to go through the entire library. I didn't care how long it took. Even if the answer lay in the index page, or an off-hand comment scribed in the margin of some unrelated book, I was going to find a way to unlock the collars.

Rhydian had stopped sleeping in our bunk which had made my nightmares so much worse. I'd resorted to spending almost every night in his office, falling asleep at his desk whilst he slept in his armchair, just to stave off the dreams. The nights I did dream, I'd awaken to find him asleep, not by my side, but on his mother's bench in *The Gardens*, his head on her lap.

I'd tried to distract myself from my failure by visiting *MedCom* with my bunkmates. Hentirion still hadn't woken up yet. Sal, who was now aware of his T'eiryash status, claimed his body was still behaving like it should given how much power his blessing had exerted. She still expected him to wake, which was a relief. Now

whenever I visited I would read to him. From anything I could get my hands on. But in particular, the work he was writing about me, about us. So much of it was simply musings, and though I wasn't sure if he would have approved, as I read I left little annotations in the margins where I thought of something he might find amusing or what I thought needed further clarification or correction. Reading had been something my mother had done whenever I was sick and it had always helped me. I didn't know if it was helping him though. Whenever I tried to reach his mind I found silence, as if I was trying to converse with a stone wall. But I kept reading to him anyway.

Farox had healed well. The morning Sal gave him the all-clear, he returned to training with Saska and S'vara in *The Fight Hall*. We may have been done with the train, but The Core still forced us to participate in the Hunt. Their new favoured location was The Old Capital. They drew one hunt every day for a week after the raid on the factory, but when we only lost fifty passengers during that time, they cut our rations in half, and then only called one hunt a week for the rest of Frostfall, forcing the Runners to go on extra supply runs.

The only reprieve we seemed to have was on Ebonmas. Turned out the darkest and coldest day of the year was the one day Kensilla couldn't be bothered to torture us, and the residents spent it drinking, gift giving, and lighting candles to prevent the God Aubryn from boarding the train and kidnapping those rude enough not to offer him a warm hearth in Frostfall. But come the dawn and The Hunt was the first thing on anyone's minds.

Tira had even started coming to training classes since her antlers had finally regrown, in part due to Frostfall's arrival, allowing her to return to a more human state. She had been wanting to learn how to defend herself without brandishing them as a weapon, and since there were no longer any children left on the train to have school classes aside from herself, she thought it was a useful waste of her time. She wasn't a very good fighter. Frankly the only reason she probably survived this long was because she was fast on her feet. That and pure dumb luck.

But she had grown so bored with our company, and without Frey and the other children around to entertain her. She begged me to let

her read some of Rhydian's books. He had such a large collection of children's books in the office library that the idea of refusing her felt cruel. She'd stay with me in his office when I worked, until one day Rhydian walked in on me teaching her to read. He volunteered that night to take over and let me get some sleep. When I woke up a few hours later they were still going. It turned out to be as good a distraction for him as it was for me.

For a while, I thought his behaviour was because of his revelation to his friends. He'd been isolating himself so much that I thought he was avoiding them. I'd called a small meeting with the Runners in Rhydian's immediate circle to discuss the issue. But there wasn't one. They asked questions out of curiosity, but whether Rhydian was a Hemopath or Human made no difference to them. Rhydian hadn't changed. Just their knowledge about him had. I had been so relieved for him and when Rhydian had smiled and hugged his friends, I thought it was a path forward.

But I found him an hour later back in his library, scouring through another pile of books.

He'd even started going out on supply runs, completely ignoring the council travel ban for him. The council in the end gave up trying to keep him on board. With the influx of new passengers our stores were running low, and with nearly half of the new arrivals failing to return from their Hunts, their supply caches were not making it back to the train.

He would only be gone a day or two, and more times than not he returned with supplies. But he was also returning injured. I had half a mind to accuse him of seeking fights with the Hunters instead of avoiding them. Rhydian so often smelled of blood that one might have assumed he was bathing in it. When we made love, there was always a new wound that made him flinch when I touched him.

I was scared to touch him.

He was so exhausted that his taint wasn't healing him properly.

On his last supply run, the chill of Frostfall at its peak, Rhydian had returned with a cut four inches long right across his shoulder. And it hadn't healed the next day. Wade, who had been back for a week since his banishment had ended and had been sparring with me

each morning to take my mind off of everything, had offered to go with Rhydian on the next run.

"You would do that for me after how I treated you?"

He'd smiled at me, the harsh lines of his face vanished, replaced with warmth and sincerity. "You eased Salryah's burden when no one else could. I should like to do the same for you."

He departed the train with Rhydian the next day and that night I used the blood shard to track him. I couldn't leave the train with it so I tried something else, something I only ever heard rumours about.

I scryed for him. I dangled the blood shard over a map in the hopes it would show me his location. After the shard had swung like a pendulum, it finally stopped and pulled taut in my hand where it hovered over a location on the map.

Rhydian was at Gerhold Hall.



*The air filled with a wail.*

*The wolf growled at me from over the basket, the wicker crushed under her feet, the picnic blanket torn.*

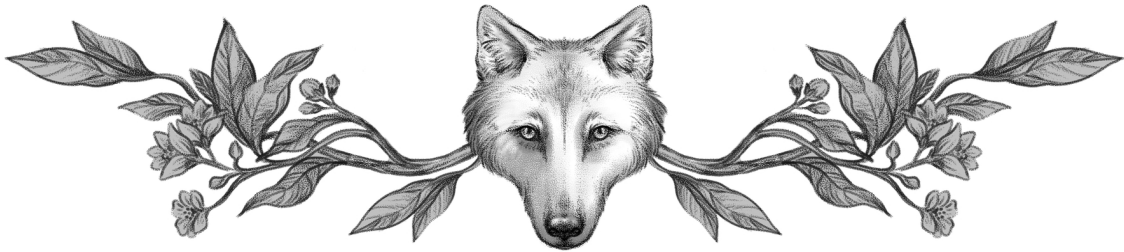
*A heavy weight fell in my arms and I looked down.*

*His starlit eyes widened as my name was coughed up through blood-stained lips.*

*My hand was inside of him, inside his chest cavity, his heart pulsing in my palm.*

*He blinked and cocked his head to the side like a curious animal*

*"You're going to have to say my name eventually."*



## RIEKA

The dream had left me unsettled. I'd awoken that morning, packed a bag of rations and sought out Eleen. She wasn't pleased when she saw me. Nor was she particularly fond of my request.

Her response was clipped. "You are not going to Gerhold." It was an unequivocal no.

But when Rhydian and Wade didn't return that day either, the blood shard still indicating they were at Gerhold Hall and having exhausted all the trains resources, I used the collar codes as an excuse. Oric, the Kindling I now knew to be Eleen's partner, had actually sided with me.

"Even Rhydian hasn't read all those books. Rieka might be able to see what he couldn't." I could have kissed him. I didn't, because I suspected Eleen might have challenged me to a fight over it.

"And I'm bringing Tira with me," I quickly added before she could change her mind.

The sweet Terrestrial was the other more pressing reason I'd wanted to leave. Over the last week, Tira had been missing from meals on several occasions. Yet when we'd confronted her about it, her answers were either, 'I must have lost track of the time,' and 'I was with Hentirion in *MedCom*.' But when asked, Sal informed Emil that she hadn't heard about Tira being there for days.

Then there was the fact she'd come back smelling like citrus.

Someone thought she might be spending time in *The Gardens* since, as S'vara said, "She stinks like that fruit Saska picks from the fruit grove."

Then on top of the fact she had no energy in training or reading lessons, her disappearances became more frequent. Farox had gone searching for her one afternoon and found her standing in the middle of *The Gardens* before Eydis's Liminal form, staring up into the skylight, unable to recognize even her own name. And she did this three days in a row.

Yesterday we'd watched her. For not a single moment was she left alone, and today she was fine.

Whatever was happening to her, what had happened to Ghena and the other children was happening when no one was around. I wasn't about to let it happen again. If I had to take her away from the train every two days with a looper on her collar until we figured out what was making her sick then I would.

I woke her at midnight and I'd told her I was taking her to see Frey. It took some convincing since she thought I was playing a cruel joke on her, but eventually, she packed.

We'd been standing alone in *The Abattoir* for fifteen minutes waiting for the train to slow, Tira bouncing delightfully on her hooves when the scent returned. I had assumed Saska had come to bid us farewell, expecting to see him cutting into the red citrus fruit since it had become his preferred morning meal. Instead, I heard a pair of soft-soled shoes converging on us, the sound accompanied by the clacking of a wooden cane.

"Rieka," Kosha greeted me as he entered the carriage, a pack slung over his shoulder. "Thought I might join you."

"You're coming to Gerhold Hall?"

Since the code's failure, the council had been divided. Those that were against it, wanted Rhydian to take his position immediately, to stop any *false hope* from infesting the train and causing more damage than Rhydian's cause already had. The other half of the council were insistent on keeping Gerhold a secret. Even the parents who had given Rhydian their sick children didn't know where they

were going, just that it was safe. Since Rhydian and the Runners had actually found half the code, a feat which hadn't been accomplished in five centuries, they were adamant at letting the Runners continue their work. Kosha stood with them.

"I was under the impression your collar didn't allow that?"

He looked at me curiously. "Rhydian told you of our burden?"

"He did."

"It is true we cannot leave like everyone else. But a day trip has never hurt any of my ancestors." He then indicated to the looping device on the inside of his collar before he greeted Tira with a smile. "Besides, I'd like to see the plans for the school house."

"You know about the school?"

"Of course." He frowned at the question as though his answer should have been obvious. "It was my idea."

With school now the chosen topic of the trip's conversation, we departed for Gerhold Hall. Lex, desiring nothing more than to get off the train had volunteered to be our guide, he didn't even seem to mind Tira's constant chatter.

When we arrived at the village at dawn, I knew instantly something was wrong because the first person who greeted me was Wade. If he was here so was Rhydian. Kris exited the gates a moment later to meet me at the bottom of the hill. She smelled of milk, of Jonah and of blood. Rhydian's blood.

"Where is he?" were the first words out of my mouth.

I could see the fear in her face at my question. I repeated it. Her reply was saturated in sorrow. "He's in the castle, in his room. Rieka, he's in bad shape."

What had happened in two days that he'd come here instead of to Sal on the train? Was he injured, was he dying, sick? A thousand scenarios raced through my mind as I ran up the hundreds of stairs through the castle until I found his scent in that familiar corridor where he'd first shared himself with me.

I pushed open the door and found Kodee, the young male medic from the compound standing over Rhydian's body. There were bloody bandages in his hands and even more strewn across the bed covers.

"Who are you, you can't be in here!"

Death carried a scent with it. A rot. It clung to the back of the throat like syrup, and tickled the nose. Rhydian smelled like death.

Kodee continued shouting his objections as I rushed over to Rhydian. The medic attempted to stop me, his hands reaching out to grab me.

A growl ripped from my throat and he fell back into the dresser in surprise. He swallowed hard. "You're his wife. Lady Kanyk."

My steps slowed, my mind, my body unable to comprehend what I was seeing. "Who did this to him?"

They were everywhere. Dozens of them, long angular slices through his skin, some as far down as the muscle. They were scattered from his hips all the way up his chest, across his Sul marks and curved to his neck where a deep one the size of my own blade stretched the length of his jaw, parting his beard in a raw divide. The cream sheets were scarlet wherever his body touched them.

A fever, so hot I could feel it in the air came off his body in waves.

"What happened?" I did not even recognise the fear in my own voice.

"I do not know. Every attempt to heal him has failed. I heal one wound and another appears. I don't heal them and they get worse. Some reach to the bone Lady Kanyk."

I wipe the hair from his damp brow and ask how long Rhydian had been there. "Two days."

*Two days.* Rhydian had come straight to Gerhold and never left. "And you've no idea what it is?"

Before the young medic could respond, another voice entered the room. "It is The Cut."

I look up from the bed to find Kosha standing in the doorway, his face solemn. He entered, his cane clacking against the hardwood floor as he approached the bed. His eyes seemed to study Rhydian, taking in every cut he examined upon his grandson's body.

Kosha leaned over Rhydian, brushing his hand over his grandson's hair. "You stupid boy." His voice was soft and melancholic, the scent of pain and sorrow an undertow to the sweet lime scent.

A moan slipped through Rhydian's lips.



"If you have taom thistle, go get it," Kosha said, directing his words to Kodee, adding, "And helum root too if you've got some."

Kodee quickly objected to the second suggestion. "I can't give him helum root, it'll kill him."

"No it won't. Quickly boy, before the fever reaches his heart." Kosha leaned down and pressed his lips to Rhydian's forehead. When the young Organic had left the room, taking the basket of bloody bandages with him I asked if the herbs would cure Rhydian.

His answer was blunt. "No. But they will ease his pain until he succumbs to the Cut."

Kosha sat down on the edge of the bed and carefully lifted Rhydian's hand into his lap, the same hand that possessed his marriage band. It was such delicate affection, the way Kosha held his hand that it reminded me of my father. He remained that way—silent—for what felt like an hour.

"What is the Cut?" I asked when I couldn't take his silence any longer.

Our eyes met across the bed and Kosha sighed. "The consequences of a Hemopath breaking an oath."

When Kosha realised this information was entirely new to me, shocking even, he continued. "Hemopaths are bound by their blood. When we swear a blood oath, we are bound by those words until death. It is the same affliction that claimed my daughter."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Eydis is a Liminal. She is still alive."

He continued to stare at Rhydian as he answered. "Eydis became a Liminal because she chose to break her oath to me to take on the collar of another. The Cut was her punishment for breaking it. Now it is his."

Rhydian whimpered, drawing my eyes from Kosha. His brow creased as though he were having a nightmare. His grandfather reached for the bowl of water on the bedside table.

"What she did was honourable, why would she be punished for that?" I asked, watching as Kosha wrung out the cloth.

He placed it on Rhydian's head, his whimpers seeming to quiet at the soothing cold. "Eydis made an oath to take on Filora's burden. She swore in blood to claim the collar as her own. Collarless

passengers before taking the Runner's oath are permitted to fight one another for battle-earned collars you see. A loophole very few but Eydis would have known about."

"That still doesn't answer my question, Kosha."

He looked up at me, his deep blue eyes sharp. "One oath sworn in blood does not circumvent another's fulfilment. Unless the second hinders the pursuit of the first. That is the only way a Hemopath can suffer The Cut. Rhydian would not be in this state without having made an oath that breaks with another."

A knot began to form in my stomach. "Can he be healed?"

"Only if the first oath is fulfilled." Kosha removed the cloth and leaned over to press his lips to Rhydian's head once more. "And the only oath I know of is the one he made to me as boy. The same oath his mother made."

*To kill a family member to protect the passengers.*

"But you're his wife. Perhaps you know of another." Kosha then stood and walked across the room, his cane clacking like the ticking of a clock.

"Will he die?"

Kosha halted, frozen on the threshold by my question. He left without responding. His answer was in his silence.

Rhydian whimpered again, the sound twisting a knot in my heart. My body was being crushed under a mountain. Someone had ripped open my chest with a dull blade and was squeezing my heart in their bare hands.

I reached out a shaking hand and found Rhydian cold to the touch, not even my lips could draw warmth from him. Sweat drenched his brow. It saturated the fabric of his pillow.

Kosha's words darkened the room, taunting me as I beheld the man loved.

Of course, I knew of another oath. Rhydian had made it to me in this very room. To love me. To protect me. To never let me go. But how could that oath break with the oath he had with his grandfather?

But the answer wasn't in the question. It was in the why. Why had Rhydian made the oath to me?

The bet. Because until he had declared himself to me, I still believed he intended to sell me as a Thrall.

Rhydian had said *"The deal was to deliver you by Marian."* A deal was just as binding as an oath. And Rhydian had made a promise to hand me over to the Naven buyer. And in swearing his oath to me, that deal was as good as broken.

Anger roiled beneath my skin.

*How dare he make that decision alone? Did he not think about the consequences of what making an oath to me would do?*

I stared down at his beautiful face, the way the pain had etched itself into his features like sculptor-carved stone.

*"You should have never made that decision without telling me first. If you die on me Rhydian Kanyk, I will never forgive you,"* I angrily brushed at the tears hitting my cheek.

*"I would destroy the pillars of the world and let the God Sphere crash to the earth before I let Veliah take you from me. Do you understand me? You Die, I die. That is my oath."*

Anguish wracked at my lungs, clawed at my throat with every rattling breath Rhydian took.

*"Veliah cannot take you from me. I will not let her."*

The voice in my head I'd been suppressing, the T'eiryash who innately knew the Gods' Tongue that had cursed my entire species to the fringes of Devo society, I begged her to send me the gaakriikta that would save Rhydian.

And the spells did come. Low and guttural, the sounds so melodic to my ears that they felt as natural as breathing. But no Gods' Tongue I spoke did a thing.

I could not banish or compel The Cut away. Nor could I summon it into my own body. I could not even shield him from the effects of his oaths. No matter what I tried, Rhydian would not mend. The cuts would not heal.

Another spell, half scream half curse erupted from my throat shredding the last piece of my composure. It shattered every piece of glass in the room.

My head snapped up at the scent of freshly strewn blood.

Kodee stood in the doorway, a glass vial shattered in his now bleeding hand.

My body quaked in anger.

*Of course you hurt someone else.*

I excused myself from the room, unable to watch as the Organic not only tended to Rhydian but to the injury I had inflicted upon him too, the scent of the medicinal herbs bitterly aromatising the air in the hallway.

My poisoned words soon had Kris and Taren rushing down the corridor, where they found me inconsolable on the floor.

They tried to comfort me as friends do, to give me words that they thought might ease the pain I felt. But they were Kanahari. They spoke of Eldertides and spirits, of fate and purpose as if those things meant anything to me when the man I loved was dying and I couldn't do a godsdamned thing to save him.

When they realised they were doing more damage than good they left, promising to return soon with food should I feel so inclined to eat.

Only when Kodee had departed did I find the strength to enter the room again. Rhydian's fever had begun to dissipate after receiving the helum root. The yellow plant was highly toxic to humans, but as Kosha had said, it did not kill Rhydian, it merely took down his fever. After topically applying the toam thistle to his wounds, the leaves a rather good coagulant, Rhydian was finally starting to stir.

He was only conscious long enough to sip some water. Never quite so awake that we could have a conversation about how furious I was with him. Even when Tira made a quick visit to check up on me, he was barely conscious. Frey escorted her back out of the room when the sight of Rhydian's body had caused her to burst out crying.

When he finally fell back asleep, his fever gone, at least for now, I distracted myself with the other reason I'd come to Gerhold Hall.

I thought I was going to have to search his library one book at a time, but when I approached his desk I found hundreds of notes and books strewn open across his desk. Everything from Gods' Tongue to the history of the Imaris line. In all likelihood, Rhydian had been searching these himself before he'd fallen ill.

One hour passed, and I'd gone through all the documents Rhydian had drawn up for the village. Another hour passed and I still had not found anything of value.

I could tell someone who the progenitors of the three Imaris Hemopath Bloodlines were by name and date of birth, the exact ingredients used to stave off at least four types of Toxicant Viper poison, and two plant varieties used to mask their scents.

I knew that settlement of Gerhold had started a few years ago based on all the village plans, but that it had halted eight months ago during New Bloom when they had learned they couldn't get the code from the factory. Then settlement had started up again a few months ago, right around the time Rhydian learned of my T'eiryash status. But there was not a single piece of information on bio-organics and a link to Gods' Tongue.

To make matters worse, I finally learned of the origin of the train. Rhydian's ancestors kept journals, most entries were too depressing to read, and he seemed to have already designated them as useless to our search, judging by the notes scrawled in his hand on the front pages.

### **NO CODE. NO BIO-ORGANIC MENTIONS**

But in the first journal written by Agiron Imaris himself, one entry had been circled countless times. Not because Rhydian found it useful, but because of a painful truth it revealed.

The Kensillan Territory Rail was once known as the Royal Residential Train. A touring palace used by the Imaris royal family to travel the country, ensuring they were never far from their people. A home to hundreds of blessed and humans, that the gods turned into a prison.

I searched the rest of Agiron's journal for mentions of the collars or the code that may have been missed but only found myself growing sick as the entries repeatedly mentioned his daughter's twenty-fifth birthday. Until finally the entries stopped.

It was early afternoon when I could finally bring myself to search Rhydian's desk, having exhausted all other options. The first drawer contained papers, designs for the Lycoan runes on his Sul. In the second were nothing but a few empty vials. However, upon opening the third drawer my body reacted violently, rushing away and colliding with the wall as a strangled cry pressed between my lips.

With a shaking hand, I reached inside and pulled out the sketch. Black charcoal on parchment. Rhydian had managed to capture the likeness so perfectly, right down to the expression in his eyes. I half expected the man to open his mouth to speak to me.

I hadn't realised Rhydian had seen my spectral in the fight pit long enough to draw him from memory.

Rushed footsteps entered the room, my name cried out in fear. Kris had heard me scream. "Over here," I said, waving my hand in the air to indicate my position on the floor behind the desk. She rushed over to help me to my feet.

"That's a good likeness," she said, noticing the sketch in my hand.

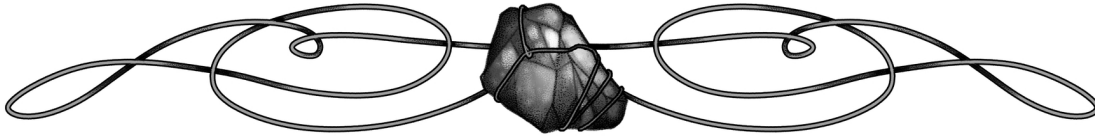
I placed it down on the table in hesitation as she helped me to my feet. "You know this man?"

She nodded. "That's the man Rhydian almost sold me to. Your buyer. The one that wanted a white-haired Brute who could only be found in Keltjar. He wasn't pleased when he saw me." She added that last part almost as an afterthought.

Kris didn't notice the way in which my body reacted to this news, too focused on the tray of food she had brought me. She didn't notice the way my body began to sweat, or the sudden changes in scent I had to keep concealing.

And when she left the room, she missed the way my legs lost all strength and I collapsed onto the floor unable to contain my devastation. Sobs so violent wracked at my throat that I had to cover my mouth for fear of being heard.

Rhydian knew. Ever since Lantern Town and the fight pit. *Be they Human, Tainted or God.* God. Rhydian had known who wanted to procure me and he still made the oath.



## RHYDIAN

***You climbed into my bed Rhydian.***

Rieka.

Her name spread through my thoughts, a fever of ferocious magnitude.

***On the day I win, the day you tell me you love me, you make me an oath.***

*Oh, gladly, my thoughts cried. Only if you agree to my conditions.*

I still had one more condition I needed to tell her.

***Share yourself with me.***

If you wish it, I would give you my soul Rieka

***I will never forgive you Rhydian Kanyk if you die on me.***

There was blood in the air.

***You die, I die.***

Slowly, I opened my eyes.

The light stung. The drapes hanging over the bed canopy had a tear in them where an eight-year-old boy, given a sword for the first time had brandished it fighting an imaginary fire-breathing monster.

I was in my room at Gerhold Hall. *How long have I been here?* I moved to sit up and instantly regretted the choice.

The song of a thousand cuts my mother had called it. *A worthy death for a Hemopath*, she'd said. Which at ten I'd found hard to

believe when I was being forced to watch as slice after slice tore through skin and muscle tissue, right down to the bone of my mother's body.

And her only recourse was to ask her best friend's son to transform her into something else.

I hadn't understood until the moment before I'd sworn it to Rieka, until that first cut had broken the skin that the worthiness was in the exchange. My death was an acceptable sacrifice if it meant keeping her from the clutches of a god. It was the first truly selfish thing I had ever done. And I didn't regret it.

My body was wrapped in bandages, and they smelled of rotten eggs which mean someone had used toam thistle to bind the wounds. I had a split cheek too which made me less inclined to talk since every attempt to open my mouth sent sharp stabbing pains up my temple.

I wasn't dead yet. So at least there was something positive out of the situation. Though perhaps I would be when Rieka found out.

I slowly climbed from the bed, my feet finding the cold of the hardwood floor comforting since my body felt like I'd slept a few feet too close to a fire. I made it across half the room when a familiar face entered.

"Kodee, would you be so kind as to help me to that chair?" I asked, reaching for the young Organic. He'd been so helpful after the raid on the slave compound that he'd pleaded to be of more service, and since our resident medic could rarely leave the train, I'd accepted his offer. He'd fit in well, and the children liked him so I thought it a good decision on my part.

But right now he was failing at his job—he was just standing there in the doorway staring at me. Slack-jawed. "Kodee, all that is steady, come and help me."

The young medic rushed to my aid, careful to place his support where there wasn't a bandage and proceeded to help me over to my armchair. He stayed uncommonly silent.

"What under the sphere has you so rattled?" His heart was beating at an elevated rate, and he had looked me in the eye only once since



entering. Even now as he fetched me a blanket, he would not look at my face.

I repeated the question. He swallowed hard before answering. "There was a death in the village Lord Kanyk, just this morning."

That was what had woken me. The blood in the air. The death. I'd thought the news of someone finally dying here would feel worse somehow. I'd painstakingly planned for the safety and preservation of this place, that it would be different from the world of the train. I'd convinced myself death couldn't touch us here. Though I knew it to be wholly untrue. And I honestly expected to be angry. But I could not find it in me to be.

Instead, I found myself thinking of the fact that there would be no sack their body would be placed in, no door opened to throw it out of. I thought of the cemetery that had been suggested, to be built at the top of the northern hill overlooking the village. A place where villagers could sit and speak with their lost ones, where their spirits, could watch over us, free and unclaimed by the gods of the old world.

The thought was surreal, but not unwelcome.

I thought I was prepared for his response when I asked who Veliah had claimed. But I was gravely mistaken. I asked him to repeat it, because I must have misheard him.

"Your grandfather. Lord Kosha. He has been killed."

The pain in my chest constricted, as if it were caught between the straps of a winch and someone were twisting it tighter and tighter.

I demanded to be taken to see him.

Shocked expressions and stifled gasps greeted me as Kodee escorted me down through the castle to the schoolhouse where a crowd had formed outside. They parted the moment they saw me and I was met with the darkened features of my friend and his lover, my nephew bundled in her arms. Krisenya's eyes widened at the sight of me.

"Jonah, where is he?"

The dark-haired Tahzi Brute stared at me for a moment, as if he were weighing his options. Upon realising he had no options, and

relaxing out of that rigid stance he had been holding, Jonah moved his large frame away from the doorway and let me enter.

We'd contemplated tearing down the old worship temple, not wanting to be associated with any of the gods. Wade had even attempted to use his taint to wear away the floor carvings when it was clear the building couldn't be torn down, but they had remained untouched. This was back before we discovered we couldn't get the codes from the factory.

In the end, my grandfather had been the one to suggest we use the building as a schoolhouse. It could accommodate all the children, even if we didn't split the classes. He offered to oversee it himself since he jested he wasn't much use as anything else. And the kids all love him.

Loved him.

*He shouldn't be here.*

Wade's tall frame shielded my grandfather from my view. When he turned and saw me, tears of grief trailing down his cheek, his jaw clenched. He'd lived with Kosha as long as I had. Perhaps I should take comfort in that fact, that I wouldn't be the only one mourning.

My grandfather sat on the floor against the far wall, his body slouched. The light from the early morning shone through the temple window, the sun casting a soft white glow across his face. He looked as if he were staring out the window, caught in a moment of contemplation.

His blood had pooled below him, a small trail spilling into the Gods' Tongue carvings in the floor. And in his chest, exactly where his heart was, glinted the black handle of a dagger.

I rushed to my knees, ignoring the way my body screamed at me. A note was in his hand. A piece of parchment torn from the page of a book. I retrieved it from my grandfather's still-warm hand.

Both sides had been written on in neat handwriting.

*Rhydian.*

*Thank you for providing me with a reprieve from my task.*

*I thoroughly enjoyed our time together. You were a satisfactory lover and a worthy adversary in my pursuit of freedom. But now that I have found the solution to my predicament you are no longer required.*

*If we ever cross paths again, as you can attest, you shall be treated as I have all my former lovers. Without recognition and with indifference.*

*And if you intend to pursue me out of some love for me, you needn't bother. I've bound you to the train with the looper. You have 36 hours at best before you must return. And please do. It would be a pity to learn that magnificent body no longer walks the earth. Like your Grandfather said, the train doesn't run without Imaris blood onboard.*

*Farewell Husband.*

My grandfather's neck was bare except for the scar where the collar had worn away at his skin. No collar lay at his feet.

As Rieka's words finally sunk in, I touched my neck where I had felt what I'd thought was the heavy weight of damp bandages. Instead, my fingers touched warm metal, the fever in my body having pushed the cold from it, shielding me from recognising its presence. The looper disk was set on the underside.

My fist closed around the metal, and I pulled causing it to wake up upon sensing the threat.

She had done it. She had truly won. And it had been entirely my doing.

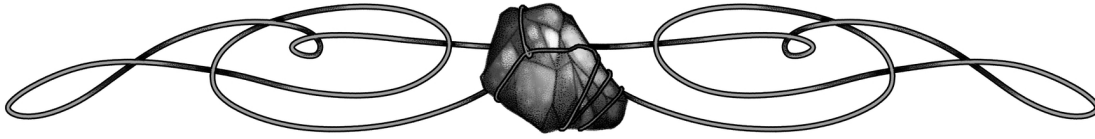
I felt numb. Hollow. The cuts on my body could have opened up, peeling the skin from my muscles, carving my sins into the bone and I would not have felt it. Nothing in my life could ever equate to the hands that were squeezing my heart, pulverizing it until it was a pool of liquid muscle and blood in my chest.

Rieka had done that. And I, the fool that I was, had let her.

I looked to the black handle in his chest, and though I knew the idea was fruitless, that it would bring me nothing more but pain I withdrew it.

My grandfather's blood scented the air.

And a moment later that taste was on my tongue.



## RHYDIAN

**I**t was fast, the speed with which I was able to locate the most recent memory. That thread was always the brightest. Scarlet instead of crimson. Static instead of pulsing. The sign it is a memory preserved and not alive.

I take hold of it and find myself standing where I had just been. In the temple.

In the doorway, open to the night air, wearing the same clothes she'd had on when she had attacked me that first day on the train, was Rieka, an expression of divine fury on her face.

My grandfather sat at the further most point of the room, sitting on one of the benches instead of on the floor against the wall. Beside him, shielding most of him from my sight, with an expression that was entirely devoid of emotion, was Ghenia.

Her little wrist was at his lips.

My own thoughts threatened to invade the dream at the realisation of what I was seeing, forcing me to shield myself.

"Release her!" Rieka said, and I felt like this was the second time she had given that order.

My grandfather dropped the young girl's hand like she were a rag doll. "Leave. Now," was the only command he gave.

He pulled his blue neckerchief from his pocket and wiped his lips as Ghena passed by Rieka and out of the building without a word. The memory told me he was annoyed. She could have interrupted him during a winning hand of cards, and he still wouldn't have been as irritated with her as he was in this moment.

"You need to turn yourself in Kosha."

He scoffed. In twenty-four years I'd never heard my grandfather scoff even once. He straightened on the bench, staring down at his cane handle in his lap.

"When did you realise?" he asked as he cleaned the tip of the bone blade with the handkerchief and then placed it back into the cane, carefully placing it on the bench beside him, its purpose complete.

"I had my suspicions," Rieka answered, her tone oddly casual. "But it was the sweet limes that eventually gave you away. The Servitors used to make me soak in them. You used them to cover the scent of blood."

"That's an awfully big presumption."

"Well you're keeping an awfully big secret."

He cocked his head slightly as he answered. "One does what one must."

"You are a predator," she said, her words quick and to the point.

"I am a survivor. I have always been a survivor."

"Survivors do not use the blood of children to prolong their lives." Beyond the memory, in the physical world, I felt my stomach drop at her words.

"Viper's poisons are particularly vicious wouldn't you say." My grandfather stood and stared out the window into the night, his countenance not at all that of a man who had just been accused of a heinous crime. "You were lucky when you got attacked. Rhydian retrieving that venom sack likely saved your life. I wasn't so lucky. The one that attacked me all those years ago caused abscesses to grow on my internal organs that burst from time to time. And since I had been so skilled in dispatching it before realising the damage it had caused me—well, you can understand that obtaining an antidote

is next to impossible without a body. So I turned to the next best thing."

Her voice entered his head as though she couldn't say the word aloud. "**Blood.**"

"Indeed. Our ancestors used to use it to hide their Hemopath status. Metabolise the blood of other Devolved Humans and one can parade around as a Current or a Kindling and after dipping into their brains a little, no one is the wiser. I simply used it for more practical reasons."

"You killed children!"

"Who would have died anyway give or take a few years. Better the known death than the violent one." His tone was so nonchalant, it could have been talking about the weather.

"Why children?"

He shrugged. "Because their minds last longer under excessive bloodwork. Fiddle with an adult mind too often and they forget their own names, and then there is the fact their blood is more nutritious. Pushes the venom right out of my system. For about a week."

Rieka's body stilled, her body immobile as if she were being....But he hadn't even attempted to perform bloodwork. Even in this place, I can feel its effects. Which meant one thing. He did not fear her.

"Are you going to kill me?" she asked as my grandfather continued to stare at her with a gaze unlike any I'd ever seen from him. It was dark, and cruel, and cold.

He took a casual step towards her. "Clever little T'eiryash. Who knows, perhaps your blood will be the miracle cure I'm after?"

She lifted her chin. "Then answer me one question?"

"Only if you answer one of mine."

Body still motionless, Rieka nodded and asked her question. "How long have you known about the codes?"

His brow rose in amusement. "Longer than before there were codes to be known. Kensilla was quite tech-savvy even when it was a monarchy. And the royal family did love their personal security to be—personal. Even if someone did manage to read the code, it was pure hubris on The Core's part for thinking no one would work out what was right in front of their faces."

***"An Imaris must always be on the train,"*** her inner voice mused in my grandfather's head.

"Why haven't you used it?"

He tutted. "That's two questions, but I'll indulge you. I was going to use the code. I had intended on using it on Rhydian as well but then the boy went and broke an oath. So I've no choice but to abandon him to his fate."

My own chest constricted at his words.

"And the train passengers, what happens to them with Rhydian here and you gone?"

My grandfather chuckled. "Exactly what you think."

In the physical world, my fury roiled under my skin.

Kosha took another step towards Rieka, craning his bare neck. "Now your turn. Tell me why you came here this morning. What did you think you could accomplish?"

"I came to stop a predator."

Her words made him laugh. "A predator. You are as much a predator as I am Rieka. You reek of blood." His face twisted into a mocking smile.

Her face was impassive, but her tone was solemn. "I know I am a monster, the difference is I only kill other monsters."

"You did." He took another step closer, staring down his nose at her. "Farewell Rieka. Thank you for the time you gave to my grandson. It was wonderful to see him smiling again."

I felt the rush of his bloodwork. A moment later the blade was in his chest where an echo of that pain throbbed in my own.

At the exact moment he had attempted to attack her, Rieka had pulled her dagger from the sheath in her boot and plunged it into his chest. She kept her hand there and pushed. And kept pushing until his back collided with the stone wall of the temple.

His heartbeat thumped loudly in my ears. "How?"

With her free hand, I watched as she pulled a leather tie from around her neck revealing the crimson shard I had given her.

"One hears rumours when being hunted by gods. Like Bloodhounds don't need your blood to harm you, but they can't do



anything to you if you have theirs. I just never expected it to be true. Nor for your grandson to give it to me willingly.”

She tucked the shard back into her shirt and released the blade, then stood and watched.

The last thing my grandfather saw when he died was Rieka, with tears streaking down her face.

“Bury him on the hill,” was the first thing I said when I pulled myself from my grandfather’s memory.

I knew it was fruitless to ask where Rieka was. She was gone.

As I climbed the stairs back to my room, Wade, Jonah and Taren followed close behind, desperate to get answers out of me about what I’d seen.

*I wondered if her bunkmates know. Did she tell them about her suspicions about my grandfather? Did she tell them about her plans to leave? Do they know the truth about us? I need to know.*

I needed to know everything. Only then...a pathetic laugh escaped me.

No, perhaps not even then would I be able to forget her, forgive her for making me love her and then abandoning me.

I slammed the door closed behind me sealing by friends and the Kanahari out of my bedchamber. Every movement hurt. A new cut had been strewn across the inside of my forearm because of the Bloodwork I’d performed. I knelt on the ground behind my desk and the one on my thigh split open, soaking my pant leg red. I tried to ignore the pain as I pulled open the third drawer.

The sketch of the buyer was missing. Perhaps that was what she meant. Perhaps she thought she could make trade with that god, her freedom in exchange for something of value?

But the only thing of value she had was herself and she’d fought for her freedom too hard to give it up. Unless...unless she thought the Resistance was of value to him.

The thought was too reprehensible. I didn’t want to think her capable—but she had left me. Could she really do that? And even if she could betray us that way, would she want to put herself in the hands of a god again, especially the one that she thought she killed?

I set the thought aside and reached into the back of the drawer and found the envelope I'd stored there. I ripped it open and tipped the item out into my hand.

The arrowhead glinted under the luminous of the room's lamps. The blood had stained the barbs, making the crystalline there a horrible grizzly red.

I glanced over at my bed and the fresh linen. Someone had changed it in my absence.

This was most definitely a bad idea. I had a day at most before I had to return to the train, and it was a risk given the state of my body. I could very well die doing this. But I had to know why.

Climbing onto the covers, I took a deep breath, lay down, and then touched the arrow tip to my tongue.



Pain ripped through my shoulder and for a moment, I had to remind myself it wasn't my shoulder. Even if it felt like it was.

I pulled myself from her thoughts until I could feel myself once more. Until I was the observer.

I watched as the world around me was reconstructed from Rieka's memories, from what the mind and not the eyes were aware of.

She clutched her injured arm to her chest and crawled across the stone floor of the Deadwood station before she shielded herself with the aged alcove wall.

This was not what I came for. I sought out the thread. The long sinuous crimson membranes that lead from one memory to the next spread out over the memory like a spider web, the paths between them a maze to the untrained Hemopath. One could easily get lost without an anchor.

I removed my hairpin. Though it wasn't real in this realm, it had always served me well and led me home. I walked over to the wall where Rieka was, and I wedged the blade into a crevice in the wall above her.

The iridescent silver thread which I knew to be mine, shimmered in and then out of existence as it anchored me to my mother's blade.

I returned to the crimson threads, Rieka's presence pulsating within them. When I touched the nearest thread, flashes of where they lead filled my head and I kept plucking until I found the one that had led her here, to this station.

I took hold of it and felt the world shift.



A forest rose up before me, dark and loud. Every part of my body was terrified. And a little excited.

They were her emotions.

Ahead of me, standing right on the edge of the forest, was a small girl.

*Rieka.*

She couldn't have been older than eight, perhaps younger. Her dark hair fell in two braids on either side of her head, and they swung as she came to an abrupt stop, staring at something in the grass.

A high-pitched growl pierced the air.

I moved closer and saw a small grey wolf a few meters in front of her. It moved to pounce on her, but its thin wiry legs were too weak to carry it and it collapsed into the grass. Fearlessly, Rieka approached the sickly wolf pup, picked it up like it were a stray kitten and said, "You are going to live. I'm going to be a Celestial General one day, and I need a guard. You can be it. I order you to live."

As she departed the clearing, heading in the direction of hazy blue lights, the scene shifted as the thread I held pulled me into another memory.



Comfort and safety were the first emotions I felt when the memory settled. We were in a square courtyard at the centre of a terraced house. The scent of blessed, steel and leather coated the air. This was the Burrough she spoke of. The home for the Deogn military personnel.

Rieka was older here. Sixteen perhaps, her black hair unrestrained down her back. She brandished a wooden sword, swinging it and striking at the one held by an older gentleman with dark curls.

This was her father. And because she knew his name. I knew his name.

Anton Nicora. A captain of the City Watch.

There was a cry of pain and Anton clutched his chest. Rieka had struck her father, jabbing him with her wooden sword.

She struck him again, and he fell to his knees. "Pierced through the heart by my own daughter's hand."

Rieka ran at her father, laughing as she jumped into this embrace.

A door opened somewhere in the house, and a moment later a woman screamed in joy from inside drawing Rieka's attention. Another moment passed and a young man, a few years older than Rieka entered the courtyard.

He was handsome, and tall, with dark black waves to his shoulders. A younger version of Anton. A brother.

*Rieka has a brother.*

His face bore the painted pesai of one of the warrior castes of Deos.

"You made it?" she asked in anticipation, her knuckles on the sword pommel turning white as she awaited his answer.

The young man paused as long as he could before his sister was ready to burst. A familiar smile, a matching smile to the one I'd so rarely seen on her face appeared. "I did. Highest score in ten years."

She squealed in joy when she jumped from her father's arms, the sword she held filling the air with dust when it hit the dirt. Rieka threw herself into her brother's embrace. "Orion!" she cried. "I knew it. I just knew you would make it."

"Highest score," their father questioned. "That means—"

"Citadel Watch." Orion nodded. "I'll get to be present for the cycle. Watch the Ascension in person."

"Oh Orion," Rieka sighed in awe. "How wondrous."  
The memory faded once more.



I felt her joy first before I saw the outline of the city as she spun in the street. Brick and stone, shadowed by the blue glow of the glass encasing the luminous powered lights that lined the streets of the Burrough.

"Daughter, hush," a tall blonde woman in a silver-painted pesai warned with a smile. "People will report us."

Barely older than the last memory, Rieka sang flatly at the top of her lungs in celebration.

"Oh Mama, who would be so callous as to report us on such a momentous day," Rieka said, continuing to twirl until she reached the top of the steps of the nearest house. I followed them in and felt her shock when she found her brother sitting in the dark of their kitchen, a bottle of alcohol in his hand.

"Orion, what are you doing back so early?" their mother asked, closing the door to the cold night air, silencing the celebrations outside.

"I was released from duty early," he replied nonchalantly.

"Is that good?" Rieka moved around the table to see her brother's face. It was not the face of a man who'd formerly been elated with his new position.

Orion didn't answer. Instead, he wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt and leaned forward to run the ribbon in Rieka's hair through his fingers. "Tell me sister, what did you get up to at the festival, tell me what I missed?"



The heat of the Solstice sun blazed out across the lake. Citizens regaling in her light picnicked by the shore and bathed in the waters.

The dream told me this was a treat for Rieka. A sign from The Celestials that this Ascension Cycle would be prosperous.

Her family had found a place to relax under a tree by the shore, the tree's canopy serving as the perfect shade from the sun.

Rieka's father lay asleep on the picnic blanket softly snoring, his arm across his eyes shielding them.

Her mother, Malori, sat before her, the thin gossamer robe she liked to wear during the summer months softly billowing in the wind. Through the material of her robe, I could see the clean lines of Organically removed wings. The marks of her Sundering.

Not at all the way Rieka had suggested—that she herself had been the cause.

Rieka raised a hand and touched her mother's back. "Do you regret it?"

Her mother looked over her shoulder at Rieka, her blond hair spilling down her back. Through the sheer pesai that shrouded her dark brown eyes, she regarded her daughter fondly.

"The loss of my wings, the pain was unimaginable."

"Do you not wish you had been selected for your cycle?" Rieka asked curiously.

Her mother signed. "At the time, yes. I wanted nothing more than to be one of The Chosen. But when I wasn't, I committed to my Sundering. And if it had not been for that choice—" Her mother leaned forward and touched her forehead to Rieka's, a matching pesai upon her face—"I would not have met your father."

Rieka's father snored loudly as he rolled over on the picnic blanket, causing both women to giggle.

"I miss flying every day. But it pales in comparison to how much I miss him when he is gone."

Rieka shifted on the blanket and leaned into her mother, who draped a gentle arm around her daughter's shoulders.

"Celestial favour prevents descent into The Dark Sphere. The Celestials did not find me worthy then. I have done everything in my

power to prove my worth now. All I can do is hope I have done enough that they don't bequeath my soul to Veliah."

"Would you miss me if I was one of the chosen?" Rieka asked, lamenting, "We would never see each other again."

Her mother stroked her dark hair as she answered, the scent of love flowing from mother to daughter. "To ascend and join the Celestials in the God Sphere is the greatest reward for our devotion, but one few ever receive. I would be proud for you to be chosen. But yes daughter. I would miss you immensely."

The thread pulsed in my grasp and pulled me forward, closer to the present.



The white walls around us glimmered and shone under the glare of the morning sun that crested through the open roof. Gargantuan statues lined the entry, their presence as striking as the golden masks they wore.

We must be in the Deogn Citadel. I'd seen it depicted in art work before, but they couldn't do it justice. It was so vast, so cavernous, one was likely to get lost in the glistening halls.

I tightened my grip on the thread and felt myself drawn to a line of worshipers that stretched further than even her memories could see. It snaked out of the Citadel and back in, leading to a dais of some kind at the centre where worshipers were paying tribute. Every single person who entered, regardless of caste, wore a pesai, the traditional eyeshield of a follower of Celestisum. Some were painted, others cloth or lace. The one Rieka wore was a lovely sheer lilac.

She had to be near twenty. Behind her, dressed similarly in Deogn robes was her mother.

"Are you sure you remember the Tenants of Ascension," Malori whispered.

From what I recalled, Ascension occurred once a year in Deos when the Ecclesiarchy selected from among the Devolved Human

population the most devoted worshipers to join the Celestials in the God's Sphere.

*Why has the thread led here?*

"Of course, Mother," Rieka hastily responded as she moved up the dais stairs where she then preceded to speak to herself, the words a tenant of some kind. "My soul is not my own. It is a gift. To treat it unkindly is to dishonour the gods who granted it. Celestial favour prevents descent."

I felt her nervousness as she approached the figure sitting atop the glass throne situated in the centre of the dais. Black robes draped over a female body. Long red hair peaked out of a black sheer veil, whilst a gold mask reminiscent of chainmail shielded from view the upper portion of the woman's face.

Rieka closed the distance between them. She lowered herself until her head touched the stone of the dais floor before speaking. "May the Treasured One shine bright, may their words be headed and may my own words find welcome ears."

The crimson-garbed priest at the corner of the dais invited Rieka to stand.

Rieka offered the basket in her hands to the opposite priest. "Goods tended with my own hands, gifted to The Servitors, so that their stomachs may be full in the performance of their duties."

The first priest, his eyes covered by a gold pesai of his own, spoke again in a kindly tone. "You may now ask for guidance, and the Treasured One will deliver your words to The Celestials."

Her nerves intensified. "I seek nothing for myself Treasured One. Only that I may be given the strength to do as my mother had. Should I fail to be selected for Ascension, may the gods grant me the strength to Sunder myself."

Her words confused me. *Had she not been the cause of her mother's sundering?*

I hadn't long to linger on the thought. Rieka bid her farewell to the Voice of the Gods and began her departure from the dais when the young woman behind the mask chose to speak.

"Odelle Nicora."

The memory faded into another.





Rieka sat on a stool in a small room, the walls draped in cloth with the Northern Constellation emblazoned on it, the symbol of the Celestial Servitors.

She was alone save for the ghostly image of a wolf lying on the floor. Were these the spectrals she'd spoken of? The language she'd once used to speak to her wolf before he'd been killed?

The door behind her opened and a young woman walked into the room. Mousy brown hair and a plain face, she couldn't have been any older than Rieka. The robes she wore indicated her position as a Novitiate Priestess of the Celestial Servitors.

She busied herself about the room for a moment before stopping before Rieka and speaking. "My name is Novice Vesia, and I will be your guide throughout your cycle until Ascension. I will show you to your new accommodations, look after your health and your diet, provide you with an exercise regime to improve blood circulation and be your escort throughout the Citadel grounds. Do you have any questions for me Chosen One Odelle Nycora?"

"My family?"

Novice Vesia nodded, stepped away from Rieka and walked over to a table by the wall. When she returned, she presented Rieka with a long narrow box, the lid open. Inside was a crimson eyeshield. The memory told me it was silk, the pattern so intricate, so delicate, the material so fine, that it could only have been fabricated by a master Spindle. "Your parents and your brother have each been presented with their own pesai. Each one made right here in the Citadel, a gift from the Servitors in celebration of their rise to Devout Caste."

"May I?" the young priestess said as she pulled the eyeshield from the box and prepared to fasten it around Rieka's head.

As the thread on the memory pulled taut, ready to snap me to another, my own thoughts lingered on the fact they had addressed Rieka by a different name.



Orion and Rieka stood face to face in the kitchen of their home. An expression of relief on his face. "Truly Del?"

Rieka smiled up at him. Her brother was a good head taller than her, his hair darker than her own. "Yes. I thought about what you said, and the thought of never doing the things I love again, seeing the people I love again, leaving you all behind. I can't do it. So yes, I'll leave with you. I've always wanted to see Prea."

"Oh sister!" He swept her into his arms in a fit of joyous laughter. "We can travel to the Wild Isles if you want to."

"Just don't mention it to Mother and Papa," she said when he finally let her feet touch the stone floor once more. "I don't want you and him fighting about me again."

As Orion once more swept his sister into his arms, another thread pulsed and I pulled on it.



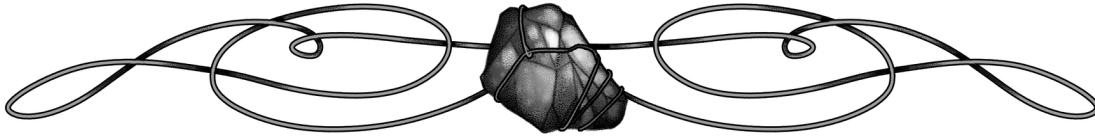
It was dark, the night sky littered with the light of the souls gifted a place in The God Sphere.

Rieka stood on a hill, the cloak she wore warm against the chill of the harvest season air. She was staring off down the hill, to the docks where another hooded figure stood, waiting by the ramp to board a ship with the head of a dog on its flag.

"Forgive me, brother," she spoke in her own mind. "But Mother is right. Celestial favour prevents descent. I will not condemn my soul to Veliah. You may be fine with abandoning your post, but I haven't the stomach for it. I will watch over you from The God Sphere. I swear it on my soul."

And she waited until the tall, hooded figure on the docks boarded the ship. Alone.

She turned to leave just as I was pulled into the next memory.



## RHYDIAN

Thousands lined The Great Path that led through the city to the Citadel. A great procession marked the end of the three-day celebrations. Dressed in garments of pearly white, The Chosen made their last walk through the city. Amongst them, her ebony tresses flowing down her back was Rieka.

No. Odelle. Odelle was who she was here. Odelle Nicora.

The procession halted just outside the Citadel doors, the number of Chosen nearer to thirty. One by one the Celestial Servitors called them by name, her anticipation and sheer adulation palpable in my own body.

The scent of sadness tainted the air as her name was finally called. She took one last glance out over the city before passing through the Citadel doors.

Odelle was escorted to a corridor, through one large door, then another until eventually she stood outside the room she knew to be the Chamber of the Gods. She'd rehearsed this very part with Vesia nearly a dozen times in the last few months, but she'd never entered the room, her memories informed me.

It was a vast circular chamber, with Gods' Tongue on the sloping floor and walls made of shimmering silver so smooth they were practically mirrors.

The Chosen formed a circle around the room, all standing before their guides facing the inside of the circle and when Odelle spotted Vesia, it took all her self-control to not lose her composure and run to the woman who had become her closest friend.

A goblet was held in the Priestesses' hand. It wasn't until the last of The Chosen had taken their place, and the doors to the chamber had closed that the Priestess handed it to Odelle.

A prayer was spoken and then she drank. I tasted honey and aniseed on my tongue. More prayers were spoken by the Speaker, phrases returned and repeated by both the Servitors and the Chosen until finally, the Speaker said, "Turn and face your gods."

Odelle turned to face the wall of the chamber where the outline of a door began to glow in the silver of the wall before her.

The wall vanished within the outline and a figure in a mask appeared. A great golden raven mask.

The Huntsman.

The moment they stepped through, the hairs on my arms raised in conjunction with her own.

The room filled with fear.

I watched in horror, the moment imprinted in her memory in the crispest of details as each Servitor pulled a black-handled blade from a sheath hidden in the robes on their backs.

In unison, the Servitors shouted, "Ascend!"

As one, and with the speed only achieved with practice, each Servitor raised the blade to their Chosen's neck and sliced through their throats.

I clutched at my own throat as I felt a shadow of that pain.

My instinct to use my taint kicked in, the drive to protect her compelling me, but in here, I was powerless. Nothing but an observer forced to watch as the horrific events unfolded.

Odelle had moved on instinct, the blade only managing to slice through her skin. She collapsed to the floor, her hand to her throat as she tried to stop what bleeding there was from seeping from the wound.

Odelle stared up at the woman who had become her friend, a woman whom she had confided in for months. A woman who stared

down at her like they meant nothing to one another, her expression cold and disappointed.

The limp bodies of every Chosen were held in the arms of their Servitor, their white robes darkening as the blood ran from their open throats and the panicked looks in their eyes fell to blank stares.

The room filled with the scent of blood as each Chosen was exsanguinated, the very essence of their beings pouring onto the floor as the carvings beneath their bodies served as a pathway into the centre of the room, the very reason why the floor sloped.

A voice so lovely, so intoxicating filled the room. "Looks like we have a winner."

The words spoken were harsh, a language a rare few could speak outside of The Gods Hold, and yet as those masked creatures spoke in their own tongue, I understood their words. For she, Odelle could comprehend the gods' words.

Another deeper and equally lovely voice spoke. "Save some for us Lemir, we want a taste later."

"Perhaps tomorrow. He looks ready to devour her," a third god said as they knelt and ran their hand down the paling face of the young man dying on the floor before her.

"What do you suppose that one is?" said the fourth masked god.

The Huntsman knelt then before Odelle, the golden mask they wore taking on a horrible shade of red as it reflected the sudden colour change in the chamber.

Raising a pale masculine hand, The Huntsman removed their mask.

Her thoughts in that moment spoke of two things she knew for certain.

The first. Never had a Deogn seen a god's face, not even depicted in art.

The second. This was the most beautiful man she had ever seen, that had ever existed. Pale blond hair, eyes as gold as the mask he wore, and a face as cold as it was divine.

But what I knew when I saw his face was confirmation of a terrible truth I'd kept to myself since Lantern Town. The god who she created as a spectral in the fight pit, and the man who hired me to

retrieve her from Keltjar were one in the same. *Who told me the lie, him or her?*

When the Huntsman spoke, in a voice only Odelle could hear, even my own body trembled.

***"I claim you little wolf, from now until your last breath, until the final drop of blood leaves your veins, you are mine Odelle Nicora."***

They held their hand out to Vesia who handed over the blade which he immediately slid over his tongue.

Odelle tried to crawl away. ***"Be still,"*** the voice in her head said, and I felt my own body obey his decree. His golden eyes remained locked on hers when he ordered to have her taken to his chambers.

Four men, members of the Citadel Watch, the same contingent her brother had been a part of entered from the doorway behind him and picked up Odelle's now compliant and limp body. Panic and fear began to overwhelm her as her head lolled back in their arms and she witnessed each god in the chamber remove their own masks before they walked towards the expanding pool of blood in the centre of the room.

A blindfold was placed over her eyes and for a moment, the memory vanished. I felt her being carried. The sound the guards' feet made on the floor changed from metallic to stone. A door was opened and she was placed in an upright position.

I knew she wanted to run, but her body refused to obey her. It felt heavy, like lead. She found herself incapable of moving even the pinkie finger on her blood-covered hand.

The Huntsman's voice returned. He instructed her to remove her blindfold. She obeyed.

The memory remained fuzzy for a few seconds as her eyes adjusted. We were standing in a bedchamber with a mirror encompassing an entire wall from ceiling to floor. Exquisite luxury claimed every corner of the room, it adorned the body of the god that had claimed her.

Standing behind her in silk robes of black and gold, the god congratulated her on becoming this cycles Treasured One. He then

informed her that since it was he who had claimed her all those months ago for Ascension, her initiation fell to him.

Odelle was frozen, unable to move as she watched his reflection approach her from behind. I felt the sensation of his hand against my own skin as he slid the dark hair from her shoulder and caressed her neck, and then held it there. I watched as the wound along her throat healed, but just enough to leave a scar.

"A reminder of our first meeting," he said in her ear.

Perhaps believing it might aid in her survival, Odelle replied, "Thank you."

"Be silent," he said as he ran a finger down the curve of her neck.

A moment later pain ripped through my body as he pierced her throat with his teeth. Two sharp canines impaled into the vein in her neck, the pain so shocking her eyes closed as a reaction causing the memory to vanish.

His voice returned and ordered her to keep them open. So she did. And I am forced to watch as the god she once prayed to drank the blood from her very veins, from a body forced to submit to his touches as it weakened and finally fell into his embrace.

I could feel her heartbeat slowing. Odelle was dying, the edges of the memory darkening as her vision began to turn hazy. I felt his hands as he lifted her and carried her onto the bed at the centre of the chamber.

After placing her down, he ran his hands down the curves of her body like a lover. His admiration turned to her wrist and he took it into his hand, brought it to his lips and then ripped into her flesh and drank.

I had to disassociate, to remind myself this was in the past. I had to remind myself that Odelle was not in that moment suffering this unimaginable torture. I had to cut myself off from her pain or else I would not make it out of the memory alive.

He did this again, tearing into the vein on the inside of her elbow, and after relishing there, he lifted her dress and ran his hands over her thighs. He lowered himself over her, parting her legs with a kiss that made her body involuntarily react in pleasure, and then he drank from there too.

When he was done, her body numb from the pain and exhaustion, her voice no longer silenced, Odelle prayed for death.

"Death," the god said, "is a far-off thing my little wolf."

As he cleaned himself off in the basin by the window, Odelle saw her own reflection in another mirror above the bed. She could not move her body, not because she'd been ordered, but because she no longer had the will to. All colour had fled her skin. The pearly white dress garment now bore a scarlet apron that trailed from her neck to her groin.

"I shall return in a few days, I suggest you sleep." But she did not sleep. She cursed herself for not leaving with her brother and hoped she did not see morning.

But she saw the morning arrive and with it two Servitors. Organics who tended to her body, mending the tears in her flesh, the bruises on her skin, forcing her body to produce new blood cells, and rebuild her blood supply until her cheeks turned pink. Together they removed any trace of the god's impact on her body.

Odelle's mind suddenly cleared of all pain. Rage took over. I felt her body change, the bones breaking and re-fusing within seconds. I felt her skin as it tore and mended.

A wolf took her place in the chamber, a wolf that lashed out at the two Servitors before they had a chance to react. I could taste their blood on my tongue as she tore through the throat of one with her teeth and ripped through the chest of the other with her claws.

The door to the chamber opened and the wolf snarled as her god entered, amusement lining his beautiful features.

"My my, aren't you a little monster." He stepped into the chamber coming face to face with the wolf that Odelle had become. "That is what you are. A monster. You fear it, this side of yourself. You cannot control it."

Instantly her body changed back to human. Clothes torn, her body covered in blood, she glared angrily into her god's golden eyes.

**"You have strived your entire life to get it under control,"** his voice said in her mind. **"But you have always failed. It is why your brother left after all."**



Unable to speak aloud once again, she denies him in her mind. *"No it isn't!"* she yelled.

***"Yes it is,"*** he replied calmly.

My own stomach twisted at what I was witnessing. The god was warping her memory.

***"Your selection as Chosen meant he no longer had to watch over you."***

*"No!"*

***"He had to make sure your parents were safe and your ascension meant he was finally free to live his own life. Without you in it."***

*"Lies!"* she cried in anguish.

***"How else was your mother sundered if not by you?"***

*"No."* Her voice was barely even a whisper in her mind. I could feel her succumbing to his words as he pressed his body into hers.

He ran a hand down the naked flesh of her arm. ***"And your father discouraging you from joining the guard, why else if not because of how dangerous you are."***

*"Because I'm a monster,"* she said through a devastated expression.

***"As am I, but I love you for it."***

*"Yes, you do."*

***"You are a monster."***

*"I am a monster."*

***"But who loves you?"***

*"You do."*

He took her chin in his hand. ***"And who am I?"***

*"The Huntsman, the whisperer, death incarnate,"* she replied, her voice cracking.

***"Yes, and only a monster can love a monster."***

*"Only a monster can love a monster."*

He released his hold on her chin. *"Now get dressed, you have a congregation to greet."*



What followed was not a normal procession of memories, rather it seemed her mind was incapable of ascertaining when each one occurred and instead had joined them together in one long string of instances.

Odelle returned to her chambers, unable to speak though she was often spoken to, dressed in a new gown nightly, forced to stand before the mirror and await as a new god entered her chamber and made her body theirs. One night, it was a goddess who drank the blood from her veins, touched her body against her will and made her beg for death, a prayer which they refused. Another night, she had no time to beg for her end for the god who fed from her drained her in one go.

Come morning, her body was once again tended to by new Servitors, these two surviving the morning, both of whom she was ordered to obey by the command of her Huntsman. Forced to wash away the remnants of her assault in a hot bath tainted with sweet limes to hide the scent of the blood that had soaked into her skin.

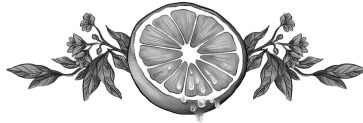
Each day repeated as the one before. She sat on the glass throne of the Treasured One's dais, wearing garments that barely covered her body, listening to the prayers and wishes of Deos's most devout, only to return to her chambers at night where once again, her body was trespassed against her will.

Night after night they fed from her, unable to scream, crying tears they cared nothing for, praying for a death that would never come. And when her own mother made the pilgrimage to the Citadel to seek advice from the Treasure One, Odelle was unable to seek the comfort of her embrace, forced to sit in silence and listen to her mother's proud adoring words. Blessed that her daughter shall become an Astral in the God Sphere during the next Ascension, forbidden to ask for help by the god who had claimed her as his.

Lemir. That's the name he asked her to call him when he finally visited again. "You may now call me, Lemir."

And in what seemed like a year that followed the progression of memories, I came to realise that in some twisted way, Odelle had come to believe that this god cared for her, loved her in his own way. He made her feel that love, made love to her until one day he marked her as his with the symbol of his position. Twelve black spots on the inside of her wrist in the pattern of the Raven constellation. His constellation.

The memory snapped violently into another.



Odelle stood motionless, her gaze locked on Lemir where he stood in the centre of her chambers. At his feet, a body lay dead, torn and dismembered, their blood smeared across her face like a mask. The body had belonged to Priestess Vesia.

Beside the body, discarded and unsheathed lay the black-handled dagger once wielded against Odelle.

"I killed her," Odelle said, her voice trembling.

Her god replied simply with, "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you are with child and they see it as a threat. Vesia was tasked with killing it."

Odelle's hand fell to her stomach, and I realised that the weight my body felt within the memory was physical. She was far enough along that her stomach was showing beneath the white dress, the blood on her hand imprinting on the fabric.

Her anger shot to the surface and through gritted teeth she blamed him. "This is your doing!"

Her god rushed towards her, his hand wrapping around her throat, her tiptoes the only thing touching the ground as he raised her up in anger. "THAT IS MY CHILD YOU CARRY, AND I WILL CLAIM IT!"

The god sucked in a sharp breath. His expression shocked. Blood dripped from his open mouth. He looked down as his grip fell from Odelle's neck.

I circled the scene and found Rieka had plunged her hand inside of the god's chest. She then ripped it out, and I tasted the god's blood on the air. In her grasp was the god's still beating heart.

The golden-haired immortal fell limp to the floor, the heart in her hand now silent. The beating ceased.

***"You did it, Odelle. You have freed yourself."***

Odelle gave no indication she had heard the voice, whilst my own body jumped in shock in the physical world.

The god's voice had filled her head, his tone not unlike that of her own voice.

From over her shoulder, her dead god appeared, golden-haired and golden-eyed. But Odelle did not seem to see him.

The memory contained two gods, both identical, one living and one dead.

***"You must leave. If the Celestials find you, they will bleed you dry and burn your body with the rest of the sacrifices,"*** the god over her shoulder said. Odelle turned from the sight on the floor and ran to her bed. As she did, I witnessed the dead god vanish, only to reappear when she looked at the corpse.

Once again, my body in the physical world roiled in anger. Her god was altering her memories, warping her mind again.

***"You will flee Aronbok. To protect the child from The Celestials, you will hide in the Green Waste and there you will wait."***

Odelle paused in her packing, the false image of the dead god on her floor flickering in the memory's periphery.

She was hesitating.

The living god that she could not see drew closer to her until he could whisper in her ear. ***"You will go to the Green Waste and you will wait. You will not know why. Just that that is where you will be safest. And when I find you there, you will come to me. And you will give me what is mine."***

Odelle blinked and returned to her hasty packing, all whilst the living god watched. When she had finished, she regarded the room, the real and implanted corpses on the floor. Relief flooded her face as she touched her stomach and let out a shuddering breath.

On her way from the room, as the memory began to fade into the next, I saw her pick up and pocket the black-handled dagger.



A single lamp shone overhead illuminating the doorway to the back of the apartments. Many months had passed, and the season had grown wet. Mud clung to her boots.

I could feel the chill of the wind in the memory. I felt her exhaustion. She'd travelled a long way.

Odelle knocked on the door and waited as heavy rain pelted down on her hood. A moment passed and she raised her hand to knock again. The door opened.

Her father stood in the doorway, his eyes narrowed as he looked at his visitor without recognition. Regardless of the rain, she flipped back her hood and greeted him.

"Hello, Papa." Odelle didn't give him a chance to respond, despite missing the sound of his voice. The memory told me she'd come for a reason.

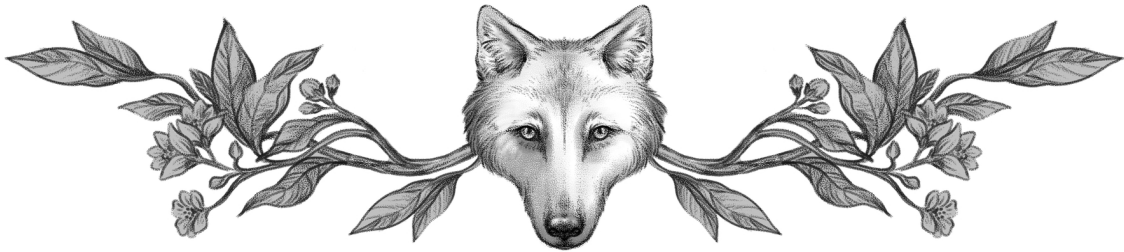
She took a step into the house, her mere presence forcing her father to withdraw inside. Her mother appeared a moment later from within the kitchen, alarmed by the silence of her husband and quickly hushed herself when she recognised her daughter.

Shutting the door behind herself and having checked her parents were indeed alone in the apartment, Odelle pulled off her cloak and draped it over the dining room chair.

Her mother's legs visibly failed her, forcing her to seek out the stability of her husband's arms as they gazed at their daughter and the very pregnant state of her body.

Clear and direct were the words she used to convince her parents to abandon their obligations to their gods.

"Help me protect him."



## RIEKA

Wind howled, a wraith lamenting its loss as it passed through the alleys of Lantern Town. The residents wore heavy cloaks to shield themselves from the chill and the wind that threatened to overturn their stalls.

I felt a kinship with the wind song, as if it were written for my ears alone. It sings of the ache in my chest that does not belong to my grief for Tiny. A hymn of anguished tears shed for a stranger whose face lingered in the back of my mind. Ocean eyes, golden waves and the scent of a pine forest after the rain.

I could not recall his name.

The note in my hand told me it was my choice, the words penned by my own hand.

The Soulstitcher who gave it to me claimed I asked her to. After she had taken my memories from me.

*You have done this for them. You need not know what was taken, just that it mattered enough to forget about it forever. Know that you have done it for*

*love. And you do not regret your choice.*

I could not fathom what had been taken. I would not have committed myself to something so irreversible as removing memories if I had any other choice.

The tent flap behind me opened, the scent of apple spice and pipeweed accompanying the woman as she circled my crouched figure. I'd taken to sitting on the stoop of her establishment, knowing it would be safer for her if I wasn't inside when *he* came for me.

"You say I've been here for a day?"

The Soulstitcher drew on the stem of her pipe. "Arrived last night. You had company, the company left, you stayed. I told you that already dear."

"Sorry, I know you did." Because it had been the first thing I'd asked before she'd handed me the note.

She drew on her pipe again and held out her hand. "You want this, or can I trade it?" she asked, holding my collar. The silver metal winked, the light of the luminous lamps bouncing off the cold steel.

I ran a hand along my collarbones, and up the curve of my neck, my fingers grazing over the new scars that accompanied the old one. It had been gone when I had come out of the Soulstitcher's trance, placed on the table before me, the note folded underneath.

I knew I'd spent five months in the collar. But no matter how hard I tried, I did not know where I'd spent those five months, or with whom. I just knew that they were someone I loved enough about to forget for their safety. The collar was part of that time. I feared it, hated it and yet I loved it because—because of someone I cannot remember.

Now my neck was bare, and whilst a part of me was grateful the collar was not longer around my neck, I still felt like something was missing.

"You keep it," I finally said. "I don't need it where I'm going."

Overhead a raven cawed and my body startled. I watched as the Soulstitcher looked up at the creature with a smile.

"He's found me," I found myself saying.

"Who dear?"

I glared at the black bird as it returned my gaze. "A god."

The woman seemed to chuckle. "With the raven? I doubt it, dear. The animals belong to the Eldertides. Your gods can't touch them."

The Soulstitcher then pulled her hood over her dark red hair, took another puff of her pipe, and tucked the collar into her cloak before heading off down the alleyway into the howling wind.

I stood and watched the woman leave, her words as confusing as they were comforting. The wind lamented once again and it swept past me, tangling itself in my hair.

Heat brushed against my neck.

***"I've missed that smell."***

My body froze as his hand caressed the curve of my neck, the scent of milk and vinegar engulfing me. The inclination to reach for Etrina was strong, but even she was missing from my boot sheath.

As his fingers reached around my throat, his thumb stroked over the long scar that was a constant reminder of our first night together. Brushing my hair aside, he buried his nose into my neck and breathed me in.

"You've been a very naughty little wolf, Odelle," he tutted. "Running when I told you to stay put. You refused every one of my invitations to be reunited and for whom..."

There was a tingling in the back of my head and his thumb stilled.

"Now you're keeping memories from me—I should punish you for this."

He kept his hand on my neck as he orbited my figure, coming to a standstill right in front of me. He was so close I could taste the clover on his breath.

Unbearably beautiful, my Huntsman gazed down at me from golden eyes that swam with the light of the stars. Never had a more beautiful man existed. The way his eyes held me, the intensity of his gaze was indescribable. He was exactly as I remembered him.

But he was supposed to be dead?



The corner of his mouth rose into a smirk. "I incentivised you to leave Deos," he said, replying to my thoughts.

"You made me believe I killed you."

In a rush, his face was against mine, the tips of our noses touching. Lips so close he could kiss me. But he wouldn't.

Because he'd never kiss me like that.

"Would you have preferred the alternative?"

But he already knew the answer.

I had been the Treasured One. The Five Hundredth voice of the Celestials, who had been so devoted to the gods I was worthy of becoming an Astral in the God Sphere. Whose only words permitted to be spoken aloud for a year were the names of The Chosen, who I was condemning to suffer the same fate I had.

Death by exsanguination. The only difference was, I had a stay of execution. My death came slowly. Every night, over and over again, until the morning of the next cycle, where had *he* not played with my mind, I would have died in my bed, my body drained of blood. Or I would have been murdered for carrying the child of a god. Either way, what was left of me would have burned with the rest of that cycle's chosen.

I swallowed hard. My body involuntarily reacted to his presence as he slid his face gently across mine to rest his lips by the curve of my ear. "I've decided I will punish you, but not because you stole the child of my blood from me—"

"I protected *my son* from y—"

**"SILENCE!"** he commanded into my mind with a terrifying thunder that rattled my bones.

"It is a shame the boy is not here," he continued calmly. "But no matter. I can always make another. No, I have decided to punish you for the face in your mind. Tell me, do you even know why you chose to recall his face but not his name?"

The desire to suppress the stranger with the blue eyes into the back of my thoughts was fruitless. Lemir was too powerful. My mind was no longer my own.

I clenched my jaw and spoke as I was only now permitted to. "*Perhaps I did it to tease you?*"

He took a step back and smiled, entirely amused. "You forget, I know you Odelle. And no matter how far you push me, I know death is not the freedom you crave. You shall receive neither from me."

Lemir raised a hand to the black strand by my cheek and then brushed it behind my ear. "Now, let us go home." He then turned, the black silk of his robe a shimmering shadow, and he walked away.

And against my will, I followed him, my voice now his.



*The sun kissed my face, the warmth as gentle a caress as my lover's. His fingers trailed down my arm, tickling the skin at the dip in my elbow. Soft lips touched my neck and my fist in the grass groped for a firmer hold as his tongue teased in ecstasy.*

*His hand gripped my chin and I was turned into him, my body moulding into his, made for his. Ocean-blue eyes gazed into mine in desperation, a craving for what only we could give one another. A strand of gold had fallen across his brow. I raised my hand to move it, to touch him and make his body ignite for me as mine did for him.*

*My fingers danced across the bare skin of his chest, his breath hitching as I traced the dark whorls that marked that skin as mine.*

*His hand moved from my chin, trailing down the skin of my arm, the sensation torturous, like desperate whispers spoken but the words unheard. His hand slowed at my hip, his caress firm when he reached my ass. Then in one swift move, he gripped my leg and moved it, raising it over him, hooking me upon his body. He slid my dress up, his hand roving deliciously lower, my skin sensitive to his very touch as his fingers found their target, the contact forcing me to bite my lower lip in anticipation.*

*He teased me. One finger moving in achingly slow motions. I kept my eyes open, relishing in the expression he bore. Excited and wild.*

*I loved to watch him work. I stifled a moan, biting my lip as the power his hand held built within me, a well slowly filling.*

*"Say you love me," he whispered in my ear, his voice low.*

*"I love you," I said breathlessly. He hastened the collapse of my resolve, his fingers unrelenting in their fervour. I sucked in a breath at the sudden surge building within me.*

*"Say you're mine."*

*"I'm yours." He kissed me, the words absorbed by his lips, consuming them into himself.*

*The well inside me cried out for freedom, his hand having finally reached my soul and pulled until all I could feel were his lips on mine and the tether between us pulled taut, threatening to snap, taking my sanity with it.*

*He growled. "Say my name."*

*"I can't," I teased back, the blue in his eyes a sea of chaos at my being so near to the climax he so hungrily wanted to see on my face.*

*"Say my name," he pleaded again.*

*"I can't. I don't remember," I said, relishing in retaining what little power I had left, forcing him to take me higher, to move his hand slower once again. I was not ready. It wasn't enough. I wanted more.*

*Something wet spat across my face and I opened my eyes and saw his wide in shock.*

*He coughed and blood shot from his mouth and struck me across the cheek.*

*He looked down at his chest. There was a hand pushed through it, his heart pulsing in the grip.*

*Lemir appeared over his shoulder, with his brows raised in that bored way of his. "Do you not think it cruel that you chose to forget him?"*

*He removed his arm taking the heart with him and my lover's body collapsed onto my chest in a heavy dead heap.*

*Lemir straightened himself, dropping the heart to the floor beside me and walked away, his black silk robe blowing in the wind that didn't exist as the illusion faded around me...*

And I once again found myself lying on my bed naked in the chambers he'd provided.

"*Are you not bored with this game yet?*" my inner voice asked, rolling over and covering my body with the scarlet sheets, hugging the nearest cushion

Even here in the Bastion, Kensilla's religious and military headquarters, Lemir had forbidden me to speak aloud, to speak to anyone but him. The conversation wasn't the best when the only person to speak to was a narcissistic god.

"I resent that." Lemir dropped the robe on the floor and walked his perfect naked body over to the wardrobe where his personally curated collection of garments was stored. Right next to the one where he kept mine.

When I'd called his name all those weeks ago, finally giving in to the dream, I had expected him to come personally. What I had not expected was for us to travel to Aredyn, the Kensillan capital instead of back to the Citadel in Aronbok. But Lemir was nothing if not a creature of habit.

He liked control. He controlled what I said, what I wore, what I did and with whom. He even went as far as to control what I ate. Blood must be strong for it to be useful, because it was of use to him.

Every night, he fed from me.

Which, if I had to find a positive in the situation, it was that. Lemir was my only patron. He'd found The Core's preference for control through fear much more appetizing than through the worship The Celestials craved. And since The Core's entire system revolved around the slave trade, they could have and feed from anyone they wanted. They could care less if Lemir kept his favourite close by. So he'd abandoned one pantheon for the other and the day he found me in Lantern Town we moved into The Bastion.

The illusions were my punishment. Waking versions of the dreams he'd been stalking me in. His *invitations* as he'd called them. He would show me the man I dreamed of, knowing I could never recall who he was, and be forced to watch him die at Lemir's hand every day.

"Perhaps it's best that you have forgotten him." Lemir pulled from my wardrobe a dress of a dazzling earthy green, the front embroidered with diamonds in the shapes of pine needles. It was the only dress he let me choose for myself and since it suited my hair, both the black and white, he agreed to let me wear it today. He draped the Kensillan gown over my dressing chair and added, "You can't mourn someone you can't remember."

The ache in my chest twisted like a corkscrew.

A week after I had arrived here, a Navy Captain presented himself to the Core with news of a resistance movement. Just awoken from a poison-induced coma, he'd spoken of how he had captured a Hemopath who lived aboard the Kensillan Territory Rail, a prison that had been the only safe place to house all the undesirable and non-re-educationable Thralls. And he had claimed it was being used as a base of operations to instigate attacks on The Republic.

The Core left the decision to the Venerable Council, and so the generals had the train derailed—to *protect the good citizens of The Republic from those unredeemable creatures*.

I'd had such a visceral reaction to the news when I saw it on the media reels that I'd come to two conclusions.

The first.

The ones I care about had been part of The Resistance using the rail, which was why I had erased my memories.

Or the second.

The one with the blue eyes had been aboard.

I'd mourned without even knowing who I was mourning for.

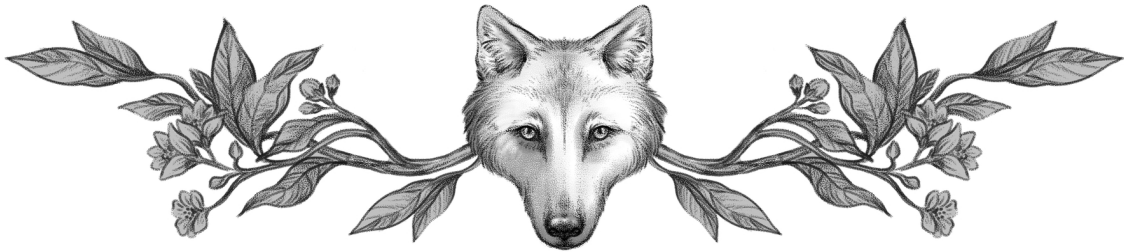
The image of the blue-eyed man floated to the surface of my mind and I smiled at the thought of him.

"Odelle, will you get out of bed? I will not have you make me late to my own festival."

On cue, there was a knock on the chamber doors. Lemir granted them entrance and in swept four Thralls in the charcoal uniforms of Bastion slaves who proceeded to get me ready for the day's celebration. There was to be a parade down the Red Road today, in

honour of the Marian 1<sup>st</sup> Purge and the establishment of The Republic, and Lemir was the guest of honour. A god returned.

Or at least that was how The Republic's propaganda machine was spinning the arrival of a new god to The Core.



## RIEKA

The balcony where we stood was on the northern face of the Bastion overlooking the parade as it marched down The Red Road. The ten gods, now eleven which made up The Core stood in attendance, each one just as beautiful and elegant as Lemir. And just as cruel.

The Generals who lead The Republic in accordance with their wishes stood on the balcony below, the medals and awards of their stations emblazoned on their chests.

Below them, dressed in greens and golds—the colours of The Republic—were the Naven and Nomen, the two castes that made up Kensillan society. To them, today was a celebration, a day of displaying their wealth and power over those the gods once called Blessed. But it was anything but that. Those Blessed who littered the sidewalks and the walls, those whose attire was tan and grey, whose heads were shaved and whose necks were collared, stood with their heads hung low as those with pins on their chests cheered in joy and excitement. To them today was a reminder that to the world, they were nothing and no one.

**"Stand up straight,"** Lemir scolded me from several meters away when he caught me slouching on the balcony rail. He barely offered me a glance as he continued to quietly converse with the

gods beside him. I hadn't bothered to learn their names since Lemir was a possessive cunt, and refused to abide my talking to anyone, let alone him in their presence.

I did as he asked, standing like all the other demure playthings the gods liked to show off on this balcony. Two dozen Blessed surrounded me, exquisitely dressed, and utterly indistinguishable from the Naven of society. But in truth, we were no different to the Thralls. Vacant expressions and collared. Ours were just invisible, our bodies bound to our gods by their will alone.

Anticipation suddenly scented the air as the mayor of Aredyn rose to the podium, the attendees lulling themselves into silence.

"And now, as a display of their magnanimity, The Core shall accept offers of trade."

I knew what to expect next. The Thralls in the Bastion, when they thought no one was listening gossiped about it. A source of entertainment as much as it was hope.

An offer of trade was the chance for a citizen, of any rank and station to proposition The Core. If the offer was enticing enough, the gods would grant them their request.

The first two who approached the podium were Nomen, their propositions that of weak men trying to claw at power by airing Naven dirty secrets. Only one secret interested a member of The Core, and he did not give his reasons why. He simply granted the Nomen's request and sent the others away.

The rest of the propositions came from Thralls, and only ever those owned by Charter Companies who were permitted attendance due to the holiday. No Naven-owned Thrall would ever seek an audience with The Core. They wouldn't have been permitted attendance.

None of their trades were deemed acceptable to The Core.

The crowd parted at the bottom of the podium to allow the next citizen to step forward, whispers rising to the balcony as they ascended the stairs.

Tan smock, brown trousers, a black jacket, and a collar. That was not the uniform of a Chartered Thrall.

Some Naven's slave had risked death to meet with The Core.



He'd piqued their interest. More than half of the pantheon approached the balcony rail to look upon the brave Thrall. Lemir included. His bored interest was quite rare to obtain.

The mayor returned to his speakerphone. "What is it you seek?"

The young man grounded his feet but never looked up at the balcony. A rare choice, and one that could risk a rejection before he'd even opened his mouth.

*Always look a god in the eye,* was not just a saying.

"I seek freedom from the chains that bind me," he had declared after brushing a blonde wave of hair behind his ear.

His scent was unusual for a Current, a mixture of oil and salt water.

The mayor asked the next question, making sure his voice carried as far down the Red Road as possible.

"And what is it you offer in exchange?"

The man adjusted his stance to pull something from the inside of his jacket, the lining a dark red. He held a jar, the contents illuminated by a soft golden glow. "I offer The Core the current location of the group calling themselves The Kensillan Resistance."

The crowd instantly became unsettled. Muffled whispers and tension filled the air like smoke.

I moved to the railing, curious like the others about this brave Thrall.

**"Brazen more like!"** Lemir commented as he stepped closer to the balcony to gaze down upon the Thrall. "And how is it you obtained such information?" he said broadcasting his voice down to the crowd.

The Thrall glanced down at the jar in his hand and then placed it down at his feet. "I made a bet," the man said as he straightened and looked up at the balcony.

But instead of seeking out the eyes of the god who had found his offer worthy of a response, his gaze fell upon me. The man then raised his hands in front of him and began making unusual motions with his fingers.

"And I lost it." My body stilled at the realisation I understood the gesture. No one else noticed.

"I am here to deliver payment," the Thrall's hands said next.

As The Core contemplated his offer, I found myself replying, the words spoken by my own hands. "To who?"

A cocky smile appeared on the Thrall's face, a smile that didn't look right, almost as if it didn't quite belong on those features. "The person whose memories are in this jar," he replied, the signs swift.

Unable to constrain the fluttering in my stomach as the expression in his eyes softened, I asked him why he was telling me.

"Because she asked me to return them to her."

My hands moved freely, effortlessly in their response. "She who?"

"You," he signed.

A knot tightened in my stomach. "Me? I don't know you."

But it was possible wasn't it, that I might know him, that the memories in that jar were mine. I'd had them taken, maybe I could have given them to someone for safekeeping.

The Thrall brought his hands together slowly. "But I know you."

Lemir called my name, finally realising that I was having a conversation he was not privy to. At least not yet.

"Prove it?" I signed, knowing it wouldn't take long for my master to read the man's thoughts.

"You have a name he does not know. A name you gave yourself. A name all your own."

*He can't know that; how does he know that? How do I know that?*

**"Odelle! Stop that right now!"** Lemir ordered when he heard my thoughts.

I signed to the stranger. "Say it!"

The Thrall raised a single hand and performed a sign that caused every part of my body, every cell to tremble.

"Rieka."

I looked down at the jar, then back to the Thrall's ocean-blue eyes.

My hands were quick. "Break it."

His boot smashed the glass and I remembered everything.

I remembered the plan.



### *48 Hours after Kosha's death*

"Rieka?"

My hand paused on the white flap of the Soulstitcher's tent.

*Rhydian's alive.*

He should not be here. I put Kosha's collar on him specifically to stop him from following me. If he was here, what had happened to the passengers?

*Rhydian's alive!*

If he touched me, it would all be over.

He called my name again, forcing me to spin around and face him, to stop him from touching me. "Don't come any closer!"

Rhydian came to an abrupt halt. I breathed in deeply, my eyes desperately searching for traces of The Cut on his body. Wounds that should still be there if I had failed.

A soft smile rose to his lips. "I am well. See?" He brushed a hand over his beard where the long gaping wound had been only a few days ago. He slid the sleeves of his jacket up, presenting me with his hands, to show he bore no more cuts.

There was no blood in the air.

I fisted my hands at my sides to stop myself from reaching out to touch him to check for myself.

"I got your message," he said, putting his hands in his pockets. "*The train won't run without Imaris blood*, I almost missed it. I was so angry at you for leaving that I was going to burn it. Didn't take much, just a drop and the collars all just...fell off." His voice

softened. "We set the train to automate. It will be a while before they realise there are no more passengers on the rail to hunt."

I held back my tears as my relief threatened to overwhelm me.

It had worked. By giving myself up, his bargain with Lemir had been fulfilled. Without a collar, Rhydian was free.

Sensing my happiness he approached once more.

"Stop!" I cried, skittering back another step. "You need to leave. You come near me and I won't be able to do this and we all die."

I could feel my chest heaving. Rhydian was going to die if he stayed with me. I'd done this for him, to save him. Lemir was coming, and if he was with me when Lemir arrived, Lemir would kill Rhydian to punish me.

Rhydian shook his head, a cocky smile on his face as he ignored my pleas and meandered towards me in that cocky debonair way of his, closing the distance between us inch by inch. "I made you an oath, remember? To never let you be claimed, enslaved, or chained against your wishes by another living being, be they Human, Tainted or God, You leave here with him now whilst I'm here to bear witness and I'm breaking my oath."

My anger escaped me in a mirthless laugh. "You fucking Bloodhound!" *Alive and still a bastard.*

I closed the distance and kissed him.

The steady calm that came with his scent was intoxicating. Earth and pine. Spring winds and winter blooms. The Bloodhound and his prey. I would die in his arms if he'd let me. I probably would soon enough if he stayed.

Rhydian's back crashed into the alley wall as I pressed my body into his, desperate to feel in control of something.

When I'd bespelled myself here to Lantern Town after putting the code into the train system, I'd done so under the belief I would never see Rhydian again. A pain only bearable because without me he would be safe. But once again the gods forsaken man had to screw that up as well. I'd left my heart with him, why'd he have to bring it back to me?

When we finally drew apart, even before he had spoken, I knew what he was going to suggest.

"No, I can't run Rhydian. Not anymore."

He withdrew something from his pocket and raised it. A black-handled dagger. "You ran from this."

*Because he was your grandfather,* an admittance by my inner voice that caused a dull ache to form in my chest.

"That was different." I took a step back, but he stopped me, gripping my coat to keep me pressed against him. Possessively. Like a wolf.

"Because you had no other choice?" he asked, his sarcasm mocking.

Beneath my hand, his heart beat steadily. "Because you loved him and you love me and I didn't want to make you choose."

*Because only a monster...*

"Because only a monster can love a monster? I told you Rieka. You could kill a thousand gods and I would still love you. I would still choose you."

His beard bristled against my fingertips as I stroked his cheek. "Well considering I didn't kill the first one. I'm not sure you can keep using that little declaration."

Rhydian brushed my hair from my face, playing with the black and white braid slung over my shoulder. "You should know I looked into your memories."

When I pushed away, Rhydian didn't force me to stay. *The arrow.* But if he had seen them, why had he come? Surely he knew what I was, what I was capable of? How could he still come after me after seeing all that I was?

My voice trembled. "Why?"

"I think we've established why Rieka. You've not been the most forthcoming woman on the continent."

I glared at him for the comment. "Yeah, for good reason."

Rhydian finally pushed himself off the wall, his expression serious. "Rieka, he lied to you. About everything. He made you think things that were never true. You're not the monster you think you are. He just made you believe that.

"The mind can lie Rieka, but blood cannot. What he stole from you, I can give it back. All of it. You would be whole again."

My mind was reeling. I expected betrayal from Lemir, manipulation even, but never had I expected to discover he'd just alter my memories entirely.

"You're not going back to him Rieka." Rhydian reached for my hand, squeezing it as if he needed the contact more than I did. As if he were worried, I was going to bolt the first chance I got and he was tethering himself to me.

"It is not your choice," I told him. "It is mine!" My thumb brushed against something, and when I looked down I realised neither one of us had removed our marriage bands.

"Then make a better one."

I'd been so caught up in Rhydian and everything he'd just told me I'd forgotten where I was in the first place.

The Soulstitcher cleared her throat as she stepped through the tent doorway, startling the both of us when she spoke.

"It has been my experience with gods," she continued, drawing from a rather long-stemmed smoking pipe. "They cannot take what you do not possess."

She flicked her long red hair over her shoulder. "Perhaps, if you know what it is you are willing to part with, retrieving it in your own time may prove fruitful. I hear The Core is throwing a festival to welcome a new god into the Pantheon. Perhaps," she added, pulling down at the collar of her blouse. "There are more like yourself in Kensilla than you expect." Pink scars stretched the length of her neck, as though something had spent quite some time in contact with her skin.

Like an avalanche, the memories struck and they didn't stop.

The memories Rhydian possessed, the memories I'd given the Soulstitcher, they all clicked into place like a puzzle.

I saw the child who befriended the abandoned wolf pup, who learned to bake from a wingless mother and fight from the father who hated war. I saw the brother, strong and wilful who defied his gods for the love of his sister, and the girl too naïve to heed his advice. I saw the woman whose life was stolen because she'd attracted the love of a god and she was forced to name all those who could one day take her place. I saw the faces of the resistance

fighters who had procured the codes to thousands of collars, who had agreed to let me return with a god until the day came when a prince would come, but instead of saving me, he would gift me the means to save myself.

I saw the faces of all those who have loved me, called me sister and friend. And I saw those who had left me. Some who I chose to leave and others who were taken from me. Like the grey wolf.

And the baby with the golden eyes.

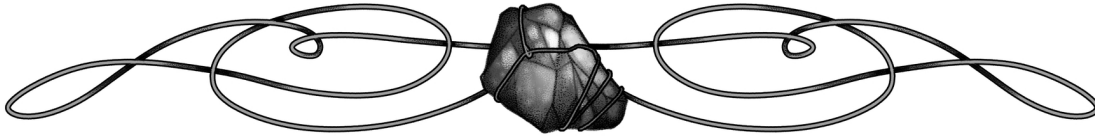
And the girl who became a wolf.

I saw the girl who used love as a tool to survive and who survived because love found her. In an inn, on a train. In a cave and on a windy night in a castle on a hill. In the arms of a man with eyes as blue as the northern skies, who swore he would cease to exist were it not for her.

I know who I am now.

I am Rieka Nicora.

And I am magnificent.



## RHYDIAN

Fierce golden eyes gazed at me across the expanse, eyes I'd recognise anywhere. No matter the colour.

"Rieka?"

**"Hello, husband."** The voice that answered was hers, but it felt different, purer, as if her own had only ever been an imitation of this one.

Fur covered skin, and claws had replaced hands. A wolf, as tall as any man, fur as black as the coals of a burning fire stood where Rieka had only moments ago, her gaze now on the gods and their guards.

The wolf took a step forward and I heard a voice in my head that should not have been there.

**"Stop."** It was his. *Why can I hear his voice?*

**"Because I wish you to,"** the She-wolf said. **"I want you to hear him cower in the presence of the consequences of what he has wrought."**

A Naven screamed. They had seen Rieka, they had seen the wolf amongst the gods and they feared her. A series of explosions down the Red Road sounded, stirring the crowd and they began to flee, the Naven screaming for their servants and slaves to come to their aid.



This was it. This was the part the plan hinged on. We had not expected the wolf, but perhaps this was better. Rieka, the wolf, the T'eiryash turned towards the crowd and spoke and as she did I saw every person freeze. Be they Kensillan, Preat, Deogn or another, they all listened when she spoke.

***"If you seek your freedom, now is the time to run. A collar is only a leash if someone is holding the other end."***

The effect was a cascade of flashing lights and liquid metal as one by one, every collar in a half-mile radius lit up blue and deactivated the nanotechnology causing them to literally run from the necks of every Thrall in eye view of the Bastion.

Chaos erupted as Naven and Nomen alike, fearing what would happen to them now that their slaves were freed, fled the Red Road. Some Thralls ran, urged on by the Runners who had hidden themselves amongst the crowd, directing those who chose freedom to the routes we had scouted which would lead them to safety. I expected many to stay, but there were so many Thralls who refused to flee, awaiting orders from their masters, even without collars to leash them.

All we could do was give them the choice. Whether they ran or not was up to them.

***"Rieka, what have you done?"*** her god cried out in anger, stumbling back as she took another step forward. ***"Halt. This instant. You are mine to command. Do as I say and I won't kill him."***

I saw the god point at me, saw his head turn to look at me, but I never saw his face. I never saw his eyes. Rieka had launched herself across the balcony and blocked me from making eye contact. The rest of The Core simply stood there, curiosity on their perfect faces as they watched the giant black wolf dig her claws into their newest member, slamming him against the wall of the Bastion.

The Brutes which served as guards for The Core took this as a signal to attack and all began moving into targeting positions, their faces morphing into their predatory state.

A growl so terrifying, so commanding tore from Rieka's throat that it made every one of those creatures cower, hoping the Bastion walls

would shield them from her wrath. Her slaver now bore her attention. Rieka bared her sharp teeth right before she snapped her jaw closed on the god's shoulder.

As powerful as the gods are, their screams still sounded human.

When the scent of blood reached me, I knew it was different. But seeing it smeared across the black fur of Rieka's face was surreal.

God blood was gold.

Rieka laughed. ***"What other lies have you told?"***

Another explosion sounded in the distance. A factory being destroyed. That was our cue to leave.

***"Rieka!"***

She pulled away, his body dropping from her jaw with a wet thwack. The other gods made no move to aid their injured comrade, nor any move to defend themselves when she turned her attention to them, their guards still cowering behind her.

***"Hypocrites."*** Rieka drew back her head to strike at her god again only to startle. Nyar, The God-King General now stood before Rieka, her hands on Lemir's head. She twisted and the Huntsman fell to the floor in a limp heap.

My heart, her heart beat loudly in my ears as she gnashed her teeth at the leader of The Core. The goddess simply looked at Rieka with an expression of indifference before addressing the wolf.

***"Had you not caught him off guard, he would have killed you. Had I waited another moment, he still would have."***

Magnificently regal in the golden suit she wore, the goddess came face to face with Rieka. ***"You were no match for him child."*** She paused then added, ***"At least not yet."***

The goddess inclined her head as if to look at me over Rieka's shoulder. ***"Don't you look at him,"*** I heard Rieka growl, garnering a smile from the goddess at the warning. Then as if board of the conversation, she turned and walked back towards the other Gods, who stared at Rieka in equal parts fascination and fury. ***"Leave Kensilla. You are not welcome within our borders. You do that and we will not retaliate for your lover's actions here today."***

Rieka took a threatening step forward, a low rumble in her chest. ***"I know what you really are. A race of a thousand faces."***

The goddess paused, the arms which had been casually clasped behind her back fell loose to her sides. She spoke without ever turning. ***"And what does that make you? Accept the grace we have bestowed upon you, Child of All. Lemir shall be punished for his actions. Leave before we choose to punish you for yours. I take no joy in ending the lives of innocents for the actions of their parents."***

Rieka gave the gods one last look, gnashing her teeth at them, the rumble in her chest making my body vibrate down to the bones. Then Rieka launched herself off the railing. She landed three stories below on the Red Road and ran for the opposing street ally.

I glanced back at the balcony, expecting to find the enemy's weapon pointed at me, but the goddess Nyar had already departed. I ran from the podium and buried myself in the fleeing crowd.

I was on the Red Road and running within a minute, finding the alley where I heard her heart pulsing and quickly came to a stop. In the darkness, I was met by a pair of golden eyes.

"Are you afraid of me?" she asked.

Perfect was the woman who emerged from the shadow. Eyes of gold and hair as black as a moonless night. Her body moved towards me in lethal acuity. Naked and pure. She was everything a god should have been. I would gladly worship at her feet if she asked it of me.

I took a step towards the darkness. "Never."

Rieka closed the distance between us in three quick strides and kissed me as if the very air in my lungs were the only thing keeping her alive.

When she finally released me, our heads resting against one another, she breathed out a sigh. "I missed that taste."

"I wasn't aware I had one." I removed my jacket, turning it outside-in again, the red leather glinting under the midday sun, and I helped her put it on. Leaving Aredyn would be more difficult with a naked woman by my side.

As she fastened the jacket, it occurred to me that in all our time together, I'd never seen her in it. It was so large on her frame, that the hem only just kissed the top of her knees.

It was so fucking sexy.

Almost absentmindedly, Rieka brushed her hair behind her ear, revealing her wrist and the absence of his mark upon her. No more did those black marks mar her skin declaring her a follower of The Huntsman. No more was her throat scarred with the memory of their first night together.

"It was me," she said, her fingers trailing along the scarless skin of her throat when she realised the cause of my distraction. I returned my gaze to her face. "The hair too," she added when I reached for the black locks over her shoulder. In my hand, the black strands changed to white, then to black again.

"And this is something you can do now?"

Rieka answered, more for herself than me. "My body feels different. Uninhibited. Malleable."

All I felt was her. She was still Rieka, but somehow her very presence seemed magnified. Every fibre of my being was drawn to her, connected in a way I didn't think was possible. Even without trying, my heart beat in time with her own. As if the gods, even with their cruelty had created us of one heart, of one soul, forever anchored to one another.

Staring into those godly eyes, eyes I had dreamed about every night since we parted, I now knew for certain one truth. I existed for her alone.

"Do you think they will follow us?" I found myself asking as the curfew sirens began their wailing, signalling for the city's citizens to return to their homes.

"As bad as they are," Rieka said, "gods keep their word."

"Then shall we take our leave?" I offered her my hand and without hesitation Rieka took it.

When we reached the alley where I had hidden our travel packs, we quickly changed into the clothes we had packed. When I looked back, I found her kneeling on the ground, fully dressed, still wearing my jacket and in the process of inspecting the contents of the pack.

It certainly wasn't her dagger she was searching for, Etrina's black handle was sticking out of the top of her boot.

"Are you checking if I forgot anything?"

She abruptly stood from the ground. "No!"

I raised a brow and leaned against the alley wall. "I will have you know, I have crossed this continent far more times than you dear wife. I think I know how to pack for a long journey."

Her eyes lost focus, her mind no doubt racing over what we were about to attempt. I closed the distance between us, pulling her into my arms.

"This is the right choice isn't it?" she said after a minute of silence, the heat of her breath warm against my chest. I kissed the top of her head in an attempt to comfort her.

"My only choice is being wherever you are."

She lifted her head to look up at me, the gold now a warm amber, and then just stared.

"What are you doing?"

She raised a hand and feathered her fingers over my face, traced the bridge of my nose, the bow of my lips. "I'm imprinting your face to memory, so not even I can erase you from it."

She finished with a quick peck on the lips, fetched her pack from the alley floor slinging it over her shoulders, and then as if she had done it a thousand times before, she flung the hood up over her head, her eyes aglow in its shadow. "Are you sure about this? I vomited the entire contents of my stomach up the first time I did it."

"As long I don't arrive inside out," I answered when she offered me her hand.

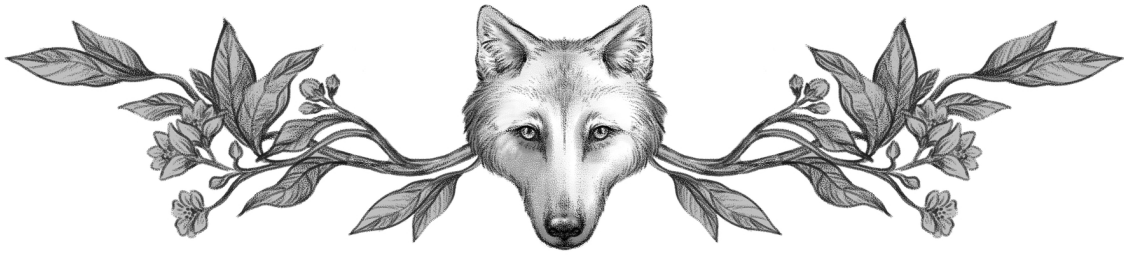
"You won't," she replied confidently, then quickly added with a smirk, "As long as you don't let go."

I decided to hold her instead.

With a smile that could make the sun envious, Rieka took a deep breath and embraced her true nature.

"Akarfenmraakshai."

And together we vanished from Kensilla.



## EPILOGUE

The first grain harvest came early. The mill could officially open, and I would finally be able to make a cake from our very own flour for the birthday celebrations.

"You know you can't use all of it?" Rhydian reminded me over breakfast when I'd started making a list of items to bake for the party. I'd smiled, then snatched the piece of toast in his hand claiming it as my own. I bit into it before speaking. "Sorry if I want to make the party memorable."

"You know he isn't going to remember it," Rhydian noted, offering me a hot mug of kharee in exchange for his toast.

"Obviously." I added strawberry pie to the menu with a smile. "But we will."

It was the first cause for celebrations we'd had since Eleen and Oric had married four months ago. Happy to admit that I won the bet on that one. Not even Rhydian believed a relationship between a water and fire wielder would last. But Oric's temperament suited Eleen.

I headed into the village right after breakfast, since I knew Rhydian had more work to do in his office that morning. The Lycoan Government was still loath to provide an exception for Gerhold to be recognised as his family estate since the sanctions that forbid Devolved Humans from owning property were still being enforced by

the Imperial City. Even with all the documentation that Rhydian had obtained from the library on the train—the last king had been meticulous with his records of land titles and deeds—Rhydian still had to prove he was the sole inheritor of the estate. The Lycoan military disliked this immensely. They'd objected on logistical reasons. Gerhold was only five miles from the Armistice Line and they intended to turn it into a military post, a thought which had not occurred to them in the last five centuries it would seem.

So when Rhydian had been able to acquire a piece of Pre-God Fall Monarchical Kensillan Bio-Tech from a collector in Athus thanks to Hentirion's connections, and regardless of his Taint—Hemopaths were still feared in most of our continent of Idica—he'd finally been able to make an agreement with the government. They would make Gerhold a Protectorate-Under-The-Crown. We would govern ourselves whilst abiding by Lycoan national law outside our borders, and we would allow them to build a military post on the edge of the estate—on a leased term for obviously economical reasons. As it turned out we owned quite a portion of the land in this area. Today Rhydian was finishing those agreements. I'd be lucky to see him before dinner.

The castle was always so quiet this time of morning. We'd taken in so many after the train had been destroyed. Every room accommodated more than five people at a time, though most were unbothered by the sharing of space. Yet in the time it had taken Rhydian and I to return from Deos, the village had doubled in size and nearly every family had a home to call their own. I'd grown used to the constant noise of the train that when the quiet finally set in after they'd all moved out, I'd found I missed it. Today, that was not the case.

Villagers had come up to the castle to use the kitchens for the upcoming banquet and were in the midst of cooking when I reached the door. Lily who had taken up charge of the castle when we left was busy ordering around the volunteers. Little Henry with his father's dark waves was wrapped around her back looking wide-eyed at the commotion around him.



She'd done remarkably well since Jae's passing considering the circumstances. There was a stone on the hill beside her mother's statue with his name carved in it that I'd seen her visit regularly. She volunteered at the bakery once a month when someone could watch Henry for her. The party had been her idea.

She brought a spoon to her lips as I passed the doorway, Henry's chubby little hand striving to obtain it.

Down the hall, under the close eye of Filora, the Village Head going on two months now, villagers were moving furniture between the two banquet rooms. We were planning to accommodate nearly half the village just inside our walls and we didn't have nearly enough furniture, so Si'mon and a few of the other Talons had been making trips up and back to the castle carrying freshly fabricated tables and chairs.

As it turned out, when she wasn't required to use her blessing to save someone's life, Sal found she had quite the knack for phytotechnics. She'd grown every piece of furniture in the castle from the forest on the estate and still found time to tend to the growing botanical garden on the castle grounds. It was there Wade had built her a cottage with his bare hands. Something she could touch. They married the day he finished it.

"Lady Imaris," the villagers greeted me as I made my way down into the village. I'd called this place home for a year and I still couldn't get used to them calling me that. I was constantly fighting the urge to inform them they were mistaken until I remembered whose bed I slept in. Though he hadn't made the title official yet regardless of the way the rest of Gerhold saw me.

I passed by the smithy where I recognised the sound of Jordry smashing his hammer on the anvil. Since we hadn't an Alchemist of that nature to tend to the metal work the village required, he'd been the first to volunteer for the position and had become our resident blacksmith. Our collection of Kensillan vehicles was substantial but for the foreseeable future, horses and wagons would have to do for short distances. And if Jordry was working, Amida wouldn't be far behind. The melancholy that had begun to effect her on the rail had vanished since she had taken to patrolling the skies above Gerhold.

All the Runners had in fact chosen to stay in Gerhold after leaving the train, most finding that their old jobs were just as useful in this new world as the old one. Lera and Lex in particular had been excited to discover that the Lycoan Military was willing to employ them for their particular skill set on a case-by-case basis.

The only Runner who actually seemed unsettled in Gerhold was Jonah. Rhydian had asked him to stay until at least after the party, and he'd agreed on account of Kris, but we both knew the day was coming. At the bottom of the castle stairs, face looking like a rather shrewd fox, Kris greeted me.

"No company this morning?" she asked as we began to descend into the village square. I linked my arm through hers, noting the way in which her hand rested on her stomach. She was twenty weeks along and not at all impressed with her desire to eat anything she found that smelled remotely edible. "They're in the bakery."

She'd found out a few months back when we three had gone hunting. Taren had told us of his intended Pilgrimage to The Hetra in honour of his survival and Kris's immediate response was to burst out crying, which scared away the elk we had spent three hours tracking. She spent the rest of the trip home claiming the incident had been a clear indication of her pregnancy.

Accompanying me on my morning walks had been her way of apologising for leaving me so soon. She and Jonah were planning to reach The Hetra and hopefully, Keltjar before the baby was born. She'd promised to deliver a letter while they were there. To Engar, inviting him to Gerhold for a vacation. They would then depart for the Tahzi Tribelands in Deos. A trip I did not envy.

But I was not afraid to say that I would miss her presence when she was gone. If it hadn't been for her suggesting that we play drinking games on that night in Keltjar a year ago, I would not be here today.

"Will you stop looking at me like that?" she scowled, her face looking more like that of a small child than an expectant mother.

"Pregnancy becomes you Krisenya."

"It does not!" she said, stopping mid-stride, shaking her head in disbelief. Turning into my gaze she added, "I have swollen feet, sore

tits, I can't smoke my pipeweed." Kris squeezed the strap on her belt from which the smoking pouch I had finally gifted her now hung. "And yesterday I cried because someone gave me a flower. A flower Rieka."

I gently pulled her along, hoping the scent of the fresh bread I knew would be baking right that moment would distract her. It did. We arrived outside the small brick building that had once been the location of an inn but had since been repurposed for a bakery.

Though I would have come up with it eventually, it hadn't been my idea. It was Rhydian's.

Outside, because he had been forbidden from entry on account of the owner's preference to not have her customers find fur in their baked goods was Tiny.

Or as the wolf called himself now. Spirit Runner.

How he'd returned he'd never been able to entirely explain. Spectrals of shadows and being born under a new moon to a pack of strong wolves had been the extent of what he had understood.

His memories of his life with me had remained, but he was no longer the grumpy old wolf who'd accompanied me across the continent.

Spirit was young, thirteen moons from what he could recall. His fur was a golden brown, his eyes a bright yellow and whilst Tiny had been mine. Spirit had claimed another upon his return. Though that was a story for another day.

As we approached, he raised his head from his paws. When our eyes met, a spectral of his former self rose out of the yearling's body and ran to greet me. Sometimes, as he brushed past my hand, I could still feel his fur between my fingers.

I swung the door open and the most beautiful laugh I'd ever heard danced through the doorway. Fast heavy footfalls pounded on the tiled floor accompanied by the sound of even smaller feet pattering out from the kitchen and towards me.

"Mama!" my son squealed giddily as a giant man brandishing a whisk and a mixing bowl on his head, came to a sudden abrupt stop when he saw me.

His cheeks quickly flushed red in embarrassment. "Rieka!"

"Papa," I said, greeting my father with a smile then wincing when the mixing bowl he'd worn for a helmet was suddenly smacked by my mother.

Orion giggled into the back of my leg where he'd fled to.

"I love you darling but if you keep using my good crockery for your knight play, I'm going to have to start punishing you."

A shiver ran down my spine at my mother's words. Their flirting was becoming notoriously frequent that I'd requested they cease all thoughts about one another in my presence. When I'd been a girl they had limited that type of behaviour in their children's presence. I blamed this reinvigoration of their youthful love squarely on the shoulders of my son. In the years they'd cared for him in secret, hiding his existence even from The Servitors, the smile that had vanished from my father's face the day I was named Treasured One had returned in full force. Bright and exuberant and had been on full display the day Rhydian and I had returned to Deos to retrieve my son.

My mother had been the one to need convincing to leave. It had been Rhydian's taint that had changed her mind. They'd never told me what he had shared with her, but my mother had packed a bag that night and had made the arduous journey to Lycoa with us. The night we left Deos, my mother committed the last sin of a Devoted. She burned her pesai.

My mother raised up on her tiptoes to give my father a peck on the cheek before turning her attention to me and offering the spoon she held in her hand for me to taste. "Try this."

It was a concoction of torberries, honey and spiced sugar, my brother's favourite. "Is that the syrup for the pie, Mama you said you'd wait?" Orion pulled on my pant leg in a request to be picked up.

We still hadn't found my son's namesake. My brother had left Aronbok without a trace with the intention of hiding from the Celestial Offices. And he had done the job well. To date, even after searching for him for the last six months, our resources could not find him. Rhydian had called in a favour to a recently acquired acquaintance but we had yet to hear word back. But oddly, even

without my gods, I had faith. I knew he was alive and out there somewhere. I would find him.

"I know but you were—" She hesitated, glancing at my son as he wriggled in my arms, reaching for the spoon she held.

"You were busy with Rhydian. She didn't want to interrupt," my father answered in her stead, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

I should not have been mortified that my parents caught me having sex with my husband in my own home but I could not stop the flush reaching my cheeks. Thankfully there was a loud crash from in the kitchen, followed by a growl to change the subject. Orion let his own puppyish one escape in reaction as "Miss Malori!" was shouted from the kitchen.

A few seconds later, S'vara with her wondrously and usually red curls walked out of the kitchen, head to toe covered in brown liquid. The scent on the air told me it was sweet bean syrup.

My mother tilted her head in only the way a mother could. Like she knew this was going to happen. "Did you close the lid before you turned it on?"

S'vara went to open her mouth to answer then quickly shut it.

"How can someone who can rig a ship not know how to cook?" Kris commented from beside me, a look of amusement on her face as she looked at S'vara's ridiculous state.

S'vara's throat gave the smallest of rumbles. "Same reason you can't swim. Avoidance," she jabbed back. It had been quite fascinating to find that they had become friends in my absence. Kris had always assured me I was the exception to her rule of tolerating arashon—southerners. Their personalities were so alike that I'd half expected them to be unable to exist in one another's presence. As it turned out, they were both very fond of pipeweed.

"Best go clean off before we start on the pastry," my mother suggested to the red wolf.

"I'll take her," Kris offered, running a hand down her belly. "If I stay in here any longer, this one will kick a hole through my stomach just to reach those scones." She looked with a heavy gaze at the tray behind my mother. The smell said she'd only just finished them.

S'vara took off her apron and headed out of the bakery beside Kris, Orion moving his hand in the Seja gesture of farewell as they passed him. It was miraculous how he was taking to Rhydian's language. It was only the hand gestures at the moment, but he already knew half as many words in Seja than he did in Deogn. And his Lycoan recognition was proceeding at quite the speed that it wouldn't surprise me if he was able to speak all three languages by his fourth birthday.

Suddenly reminded, I shouted back to the two of them to have Hentirion send someone to collect the schoolhouse lunches before midday. S'vara waved a hand over her head that signalled she'd heard me and continued to chat with the white-haired Terrestrial, likely about her own trip. S'vara would be returning to Igran in the spring, to set up a trade agreement with some of the merchant houses there on behalf of the new Lord Imaris.

Only half of my bunkmates chose to remain in Gerhold after the train had been destroyed.

Aside from the obvious teaching position, Hentirion—who I'd been joyous to learn had awoken within the week of being in Gerhold—had decided to go public with his papers. The decision had drawn the attention of a mysterious backer who was willing to fund his research into our kind and protect him and in essence me from persecution for being T'eiryash. So he spent every free moment he had on turning his notebook from the train into a paper on the existence of our kind and their impact on small communities. He was planning a trip later this year in fact, to visit the Rinnisar Mines in Athus hoping there might be some evidence of T'eiryashta in the old ruins of the isle.

Saska and Emil had left within days of my return from Deos, though a letter from Emil a few weeks later informed me that whilst they loved one another, they sought very different things in their lives now that they had their freedom. Another letter postmarked Syn City had arrived only a week past from Pazgar. Something about the business card inside with a rather distinct metallic pair of wings stamped on it told me Saska was fine.

And thanks to Hentirion, Emil had been put in contact with another scholar in Prea who was looking for an assistant. He'd been living in Athus for three months now studying under the eye of an Engineer at the School of Mechatronics.

Farox had been the last to leave. His letters indicated he'd reunited with his sisters in Torvar and was in the process of wooing a wealthy Technocrat after opening a rather lucrative fighting club.

Tira was the most unexpected one to settle in the Gerhold. Since a large portion of the Deni'Henpina Commune had been rescued in the raid on the slave compound and brought here, we expected her to join them in their pursuit of finding a new home. But instead, she had encouraged them to settle in Gerhold. It had taken her weeks to convince them since they had grown to fear everyone who was not one of their own. In the end, it was the youth who had turned the vote. They saw how Tira prospered in this new world through her education under Hentirion and they chose to stay. It was now rare to see her out of her metamorphic state, informing us that it had always been her preferred appearance.

It would likely be her or Frey who came to retrieve the school lunches today.

The sensation of my hair being pulled drew my attention to a pair of gold-ringed eyes. Orion stared up at me, the braid over my shoulder clamped firmly in his chubby little hand as his other stroked the dark strands.

How I had ever lived without him I would never know. The number of times Rhydian had had to pull me from his crib because I'd refused to go to bed in fear that I'd wake up and find him gone—we'd lost count.

When he caught my eyes he pointed to the tray on the counter, and the scones, indicating he wanted one.

"Later," I told him, causing his little nose to squish up in disappointment. "Mama will give you one later."

No sooner had the words left my lips did one leave his own.

"Atraagniyai."

The nearest scone vanished from the tray and appeared in my son's hand and before I could stop him, he'd shoved it in his mouth,

the fresh cream smothering across both cheeks.

A tentative sigh escaped me at the sight.

"Orion!" my mother cried wearily. "You know better than that, what did you promise Grandmama?"

My son gave a big gulp as he guilty looked at my mother. "Not use god tongue, cept for helping uvers."

My mother's hands rested on her hips. "And who were you helping just now?"

He whined. "Me."

These were lessons my mother had imparted to my son in my absence. Lessons she'd never taught me because I'd been too afraid to speak of Gods' Tongue aloud for her to know I needed them. But Orion was different. He was rambunctious and adventurous, he wanted to be friends with everyone he met and he was as careless as he was caring. The perfect three-year-old. I knew her concerns already. Orion speaking Gods' Tongue so young was a danger. It may have saved him a few months ago, but it would only draw attention to the village.

Orion then turned to me and offered the rest of his scone. "Mama, do you want some?"

When he'd been born his hair had been as black as pitch, like mine. But since coming to Gerhold, probably even before that—since he'd met Rhydian—Orion's hair had become a dazzling golden blond. I brushed aside one of the strands that clung to his cheek amongst the cream.

"How about you finish it and then when you're done you can help me bake a cake?" Orion nodded with a smile that was so like Rhydian's, it was easy to forget he was the son of another.

He was of no help though. Orion spent most of the time it took me to make the mixture shoving his hands in the mixing bowl and licking his fingers. By the time I'd made a single batch which he hadn't touched, he was covered in it. My father, who'd been just as bad having finally conceded on threat of death from my mother, had excited Orion with talk of watching the real knights fight.

Mal and the other Runners still conducted daily sparring matches in the town square on account of our proximity to Kensilla, matches



my father occasionally participated in and won. They left for the village hall, a scone in my father's hand, my son's clamped into the fur of the wolf who'd declared himself my son's sworn brother.

The villagers didn't even flinch anymore when they saw Spirit walking through the town square with my son.

My mother and I fell into our usual rhythm soon after. For so long I'd clung to baking as a crutch, a way to control any semblance of my life that I could, believing that it was the only way I could still be close to her. Only when we were finally back together again did she remind me exactly how much of baking was for her and how much was simply because I loved it.

Hours passed by without my notice. The scent of egg, flour, and sugar became my world in that small building. It wasn't until I caught the scent of pine trees and freshly turned soil did I notice the time.

I kept kneading the dough as his scent teased my senses. Mother had made her leave of the kitchen moments earlier, so I knew we were alone when he approached me from behind. He pressed into my back, his chest firm as his hands roamed the skin of my arms, grazing down to entwine his fingers through mine.

I breathed in his scent as he took charge, attempting to knead the dough whilst still holding me.

I'd always wondered why a Hemopath, a Current by any other definition, who should smell like the sea had smelled so distinctly of the earth, like the rich soil my wolf craved beneath my feet.

Soft lips pressed into the curve of my neck, the tip of his nose stroking gently towards my ear. "Because I was made for you," Rhydian whispered as he buried his face in his favourite place.

*He is more wolf than I am.*

"Mogya," he mumbled into my hair.

"What makes you think you deserve that title?" I said coyly, musing over how sweet the phrase sounded when he said it.

I breathed in sharply when Rhydian abruptly spun me around and lifted me onto the countertop. Hand cupping the back of my neck, he held me firm as he stared at my lips.

His hand slid from my neck around to my clavicle where he lightly drew a line down to the crimson shard that hung between my breasts. With the ease of an artist, he traced the runic whorls that inked my skin, his fingers gentle in their examination of the Sul that now marked my own body. Ghosting over the Lycoan rune *Me'laina* that claimed me as bound to him.

*This is why,* his actions said.

"My mistake. I thought one needed a ceremony to make it official," I said in a shuddering breath as his lips kissed my chest.

"Should we make it official then?" He kissed me again, lightly sucking at the skin.

"And when would we have the time?" I asked jokingly, bringing his lips up to mine. He tasted of honey and spiced sugar.

*He ate one of the pastries from the warmer.*

I felt his hand slip back down to mine, then something warm was slid over my fourth finger. When I looked down to the hand that already bore my Deogn marriage band, the familiar sight of a steel blue metal collar was there in the form of a ring. The metal nearly identical except for one thing. Its scent.

"There's an old Kensillan saying that says the gods tied a red thread to this finger and attached the other end to the person they were destined to be with." Rhydian opened his hand revealing a second ring and floating between the two of them, tethering one to the other and only visible when the air around it shifted, was a thin red line.

"Emil had never worked with bio-organic tech before so it took him some time to break down the collar you gave him before he could send these. It's why it's taken me so long to ask you." He then hesitated, his scent shifting to uncertainty.

"They are linked. Should one of us ever need to find the other, we need only follow the path of the thread. Once on, they cannot be removed. Not even with our deaths. I want you to be my wife Rieka, in any way you'll have me. As your husband, your lover, your partner. To share your soul. I want to be the father of your son and any other little Brutes that decide to come our way. If you wish it, I would claim you as mine."

Once upon a time, I would have had to beg him to show me how he felt. Now, everything I was, was entwined with this man. His every breath felt as though they were breathed by my lungs, my heart beat in union with his own. Effortlessly. We were as he said.

Made for one another.

I picked up the ring, and on the same hand that I'd tied him to me in the Deogn way, the leather string still knotted around his wrist, I threaded the ring over his finger. The tether connecting them, a dazzling scarlet pulsed with every beat of our hearts. Clasp my hand in his, Rhydian brought it to his lips and kissed it.

When I looked back up to his face, tears were trailing down his cheeks.

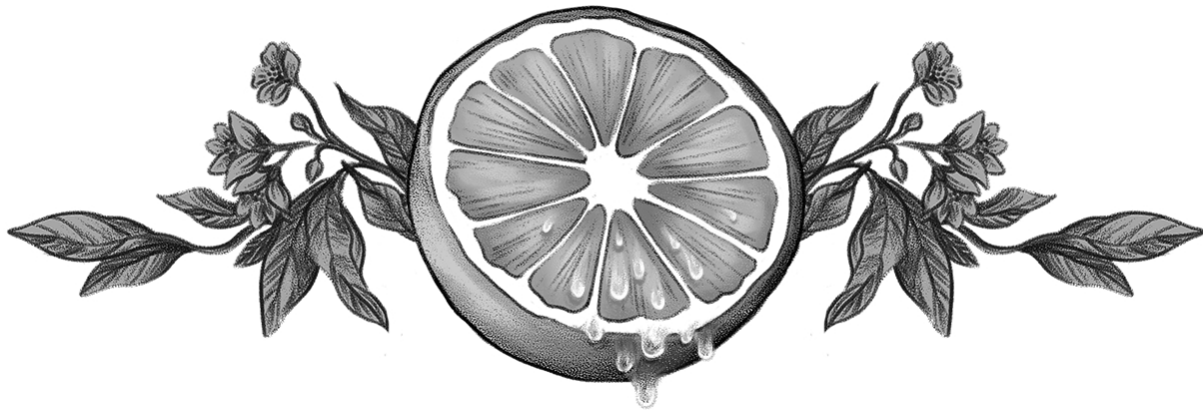
*"Why are you crying?"* I asked across our bond as I kissed one away.

***"Love,"*** he replied when I kissed away the next. ***"Thank you for loving me."***

I moved to kiss away another and found his lips instead. Strong and steadfast, he kissed me until I'd forgotten my name and that there would be a tomorrow.

But there would be a tomorrow. And a day after that. Because that was Rhydian's final condition. That he would be there, right beside me. Always.

The wolf and her bloodhound.



## GLOSSARY OF TAINTS

**ALCHEMIST** - A devolved human who can transmute anything they touch into another substance by altering the genetic makeup of an object or person into a solid element. Known elements include gold, bronze and stone.

**BRIGHT** - A devolved human who can emit light from within their bodies. This light is closer to moonlight than sunlight and can be hardened and used as a weapon when withdrawn from their bodies.

**BRUTE** - A devolved human who exhibits the physical and behavioural characteristics of animals. Further categorized into Apex, Alatus and Aquaticus. Typically identified through light shine on their eyes.

- **ALATUS** - Brutes who exhibit the physical and behavioural characteristics of creatures of the air. They possess wings and can be further categorised.

- **ECHO** - Alatus who possess the characteristics of bats, from membranous wings to sonic cries.
  - **TALON** - Alatus who possess the characteristics of birds of prey. They have large, feathered wings on their backs enabling flight.
  - **SLYPH** - Alatus who possesses insectile wings, granting them the ability to fly. Separated further into two. Some are born with wings that resemble those of dragon flies whilst others do not receive wings until puberty when a chrysalis forms on their backs allowing the wings to develop, resembling moths or butterflies.
- **APEX** - Brutes who exhibit the physical and behavioural characteristics of apex predators. They can be further categorized.
  - **DRAKES** - Colloquial term for Apexes who are predominantly reptilian in nature.
  - **GROWLERS** - Colloquial term for Apexes of the larger predator variety, such as bears and primates.
  - **HOWLERS** - Colloquial term for Apexes of the canine predator variety, such as wolves and coyotes.
  - **PROWLERS** - Colloquial term for Apexes of the feline predator variety, such as jaguars and snow leopards.
- **AQUATICUS** - Brutes who exhibit the physical and behavioural characteristics of marine animals. Depending on

the type, they possess fins, scales, and gills and have the capabilities to breathe and swim underwater.

- **TERRESTRIAL** - Brutes who are considered prey-like in comparison to the other breeds. Whilst powerful, they are typically overpowered and often hunted by Apexes.

**CURRENT** - A devolved human who can create, shape and control water in its liquid state on a molecular level. They can draw water from the atmosphere just as easily as they can wield it into a wall or wave.

- **HEMOPATH** - Believed to be a Current who can manipulate blood of living organisms. Capable of controlling a person through their blood as well as capable of tracking a person across the continent with a single drop.

**FABRICANT** - A devolved human with the ability to manipulate and shape a particular material to their will into any physical form they desire. They are categorised into two variants.

- **SMITH** - Fabricants who can manipulate pure chemical elements such as metals making them malleable and shape them to their will.
- **SPINDLES** - Fabricants who can take natural fibrous threads and rework them in any shape to design anything they can imagine. From the simplest item of clothing to impenetrable armour.
  - **SOULSTITCHER** - A Spindle who can weave and mend the fragile fabric of the soul from its essence

and memories to its emotions and experiences.

- **MARROW** - A Spindle who can reweave bone fibres. Rare.
- **SKINWEAVER** - A Spindle who can manipulate skin, reweaving it over existing bone.

**KINDLING** - A devolved human who can produce excessive amounts of heat from their body and can ignite combustible particles.

**ORGANIC** - A devolved human who can manipulate living organisms on a cellular level. From plants to human beings. Their skills are dependent on their training. The most common occupations are gardeners and medics.

- **NECROLYTE** - A hypothetical Organic variant capable of manipulating dead organisms on a cellular level. Believed by devolved humans to be extinct. A taboo subject.

**PNEUMATIC** - A devolved human who can manipulate the air to cause atmospheric changes. Capable of hearing great distances, building walls of wind and flight.

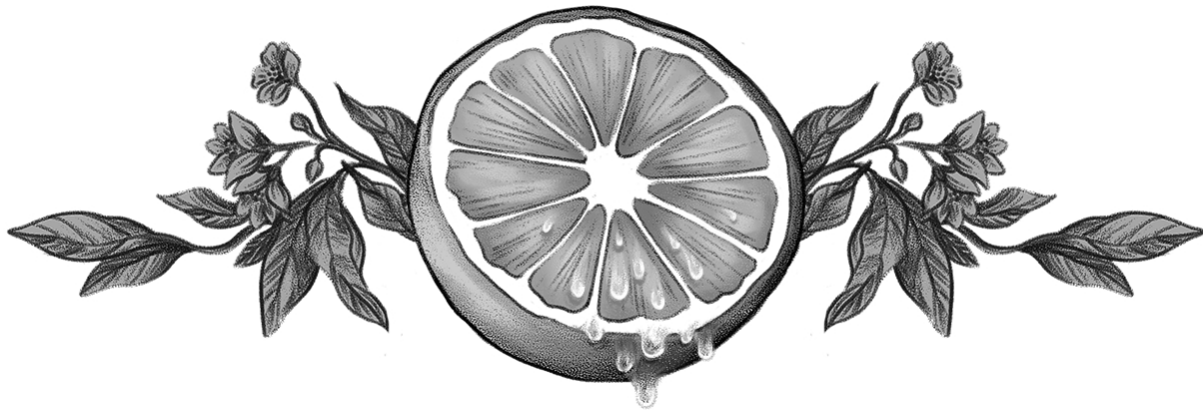
**SPARK** - A devolved human whose body can produce an electric current, like an electric eel.

**STYGIAN** - A devolved human who can absorb light to create shadows which they can manipulate to their will.

**TOXICANT** - A devolved human who produces chemicals from their body which influence those near them.

- **CHARMER** - A Toxicant whose body produces pheromones which can cause a reaction in those around them, from desire, to rage to obedience. Typically seen as peacekeepers.
- **VIPER** - A Toxicant who possesses poison within their body and who can excrete it upon another person, usually through physical touch to ensure harm.
- **VOID** - A Toxicant whose body produces a chemical which makes all other Taints inert when within a certain radius.





## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**ACENSION** - An annual three-day religious festival held in Deos culminating in select individuals chosen by the gods themselves to join them in The God's Sphere. During a secret ascension ceremony performed by the gods themselves these individuals who have been deemed worthy of the Celestials' grace, become stars in the heavens.

**AR'U** - Lycoan rune for Strength in Perseverance.

**ARASHON** - Kanahari term for a southerner. Someone who lives below The Hetra.

**AREDYN** - Capital of the Republic of Kensilla

**ARIDICAN** - A plant only native to the Kensillan Republic and the poison of choice for Kensillan Purists who participate in the Kensillan Territory Rail Hunts.

**ARONBOK** - Capital of Deos

**ARTISAN CASTE** - One of the Six Castes of Deos. Ranked third in society. They are valued for their dedication to the creation of religious artifacts and artistic expression. So long as it doesn't go against the values of the nation.

**ASTRAL** - The brightest stars in the God Sphere. Former Treasured Ones who were awarded for their devotion.

**ATHUS (A-Thus)** - One of the five kingdoms of Prea and a member nation of the Prean Union. They are an absolute monarchy that is subject to the edicts of the Imperial City. They are the centre for Prean Progressivism. Its citizens are known as **Athusians**.

**ATHUSIAN TIMARS** - The currency of Athus. Gold circular coins.

**BESPELL** - What occurs when T'eiryashta speaks Gods' Tongue, causing an unknowable amount of change in the world around them.

**BIO-ARCHITECTURE** - A taboo practice where an Organic designs and constructs a living organism that didn't exist previously. Typically, plant-based, it has been known to include animals or worse. Considered to be on the cusp of Necrotics.

**BLESSED (BLESS-ED)** - The Deogn term for Devolved Humans.

**BLESSING** - The Deogn term for Taint. When referring to someone's Taint, they say, "**Wolf-Blessed**" or "**Bear-Blessed**."

**BLISS** - A drug taken in liquid form which induces a state of euphoria. Bought on the black-market. Highly Addictive. Illegal in most of the continent.

**BLOODHOUND** - A profession found only among Hemopaths. They hunt and track anyone for money and can do so with a single drop of blood. Hated and feared by everyone. Considered traitors amongst Devolved Humans.

**BLOODWORK** - When a Hemopath uses their taint. Other Hemopaths can detect when this is occurring.

**BRIGHT-LIGHT** - A light source produced when a Bright produces luminos and it is stored in a vessel. They come in all sizes and never extinguish.

**BRIGHT SHARD** - Luminos that has been physically extracted from a Bright's body and hardened like a dagger or sword.

**CELESTISUM** - The Deogn religion based on the principles that the Servitors are the intermediaries between mortals and the Celestials, the Gods of Deos.

**CELLSHAPING** - The Organic practice of manipulating and shaping cells in humans and animals. Typically used to heal wounds. A black-market trade when used in more extreme ways.

**CIVIC DUTY** - The position a citizen of Deos is given within society. The position is awarded based on merit through religious devotion and public service.

**CLEAVING** - The act of cutting an T'eiryash tongue from their mouth to stop them speaking Gods' Tongue.

**CLEAVING PARTY** - A group of people gathered together who intend to remove the tongue of a T'eiryash by force. They believe the tongue is the source for their ability to speak Gods' Tongue and removal prevents their ability to Bepell the world.

**COLLARLESS** - A term used to refer to passengers who were born on the Kensillan Territory Rail and were therefore never forced to wear a collar.

**CRIMSON BLADES** - Blades made of blood that has been crystalised by a Hemopath. Can slide through flesh better than any steel blade. Made from a Hemopath's own blood.

**DANA (DAH-nah)** - The Lycoan term for one's chosen life partner.

**DEOS (Dee-OS)** - One of the five nations of Idica, it is ruled by the Celestial Priesthood who are in direct communication with the Deogn Gods. A citizen's position in society is based on their contributions to the religious and political systems. Also known as the Deogn Ecclesiarchy. The citizens are known as **Deogns**.

**DEOGN SWEET LIMES** - A red-skinned citrus fruit that only grows in Deos. It is similar to a blood orange and has a very distinct scent.

**DEVOLVED HUMANS** - The Preat term given to the descendants of those who were blessed with gifts by the gods. Those who are considered tainted by their association with the gods. They possess taints. Known as **DEVOS** for short.

**EBONMAS** - The darkest night of the year. On the 12th Day of Frostfall, a feast is thrown during the day, gifts are given in celebrations and to prevent the God Aubryn from stealing your love, you light bonfires to warm his heart, and offer him a plate of food. Celebrated all over Idica.

**ECHO'S CRY** - A high-frequency sound emitted by certain Echoes. If recorded, it can be used as a weapon by another person.

**ELDERTIDES** - Believed by the Kanahari to be the spirits of all living things, from rocks to mountains to trees and the rivers and the wolf. They believe that when one dies their spirit leaves the body and becomes an Eldertide which can be called upon for guidance in life. They claim the Eldertides can choose when and in what form they return to the living world.

**ENIBON ISLANDS** - A series of small islands off the coast of Torvar, inhabited by Terrestrial Brutes. Each island is home to a commune of a specific breed. Pacifists by nature.

**ETRINA** - Rieka's black-handled dagger.

**FARBOR ICE MINES** - Ice mines owned by Athus. They mine the ice to provide water to certain parts of Prea, in particular **Halinon**. Utilised in a similar way to store-bought spring water.

**GAAKRIIK** - God's Tongue for Spell. The natural word for a **T'eiryash** to use when referring to the words in their heads, separate from the language itself. **Gaakriikta** is plural meaning *spells*.

**GODS' TONGUE** - The language of the Gods. Written in a circular script, the language was purged from written records when the gods fell. What little knowledge is left exists in small parts. Archaic terms for taints, and carvings in architecture. The only known fluent speakers are The Gods Hold and T'eiryash .

**HALINON** - One of the five kingdoms of Prea and a member nation of the Prean Union. They are an absolute monarchy that is subject to the edicts of the Imperial City. They are in a constant state of war with The Gods Hold. The citizens are known as **Haltians**.

**HELUM ROOT** - A medicinal plant that is poisonous to all but Hemopaths.

**IDICA** - The continent containing Kensilla, Deos, Pazgar, Prea and The Gods Hold.

**IMTA** - The homes that Kanahari build. A hollow hut built to accommodate up to five generations of a single family. They are typically made from three substances, ice, stone and wood based on their geographic locations in The Hetra.

**KANAHARI (CAN-ah-HAH-ree)** - Humans and Devos who have called The Hetra home for thousands of years. They are a tribal people who live in village communities surrounding The White. They are pacifists and worship spirit entities called Eldertides.

**KELTJAR** - A mountain town in The Hetra, home to The Old Man's Hearth and hot springs. Where Rieka has worked for the last six months.

**KENSILLA** - One of the five nations of Idica. It is a militant theocracy that claims to be a republic. Ruled by the Venerable Council under the guidance of the Kensillan Gods, The Core. They are known as the Kensillan Republic. Closed border nation. Devos are known to not exist within its borders. Citizens are known as **Kensillans**.

**KHAREE** - A dark brown liquid beverage made from bitter beans grown in Raysem, on the island of Pazgar. Similar to coffee.

**KINDLING ORB** - A spherical device used to provide warmth. When the two halves are rotated in opposite directions oxygen is sent through to a central hollow which fuels a small Kindling spark contained in the centre. The orb emits heat which the metal has been engineered to remain cool to the touch.

**KYTON THE RED** - One of The Nine. Believed to be the god who bestowed humans in Prea with the ability to wield blood.

**LESAN** - An annual procreation festival in Deos where citizens are encouraged to participate in sexual revelry. Aid in population growth. Prospective parents participate when struggling with infertility.

**LIMINAL** - A living statue. The result of an Alchemist transmuting a living organism into their element. They are alive, frozen in a moment.

**LUMINOS** - The light that Brights can emit from their bodies, often used as permanent light sources. Can be extracted and hardened.

**LYCOA** - One of the five kingdoms of Prea and a member nation of the Prean Union. They are a feudal monarchy that is subject to the edicts of the Imperial City. Encompassing mostly rivers and forests, they are a highly agrarian nation with their philosophical

views divided between Preat Progressivism and practices taken from their former worship of The Nine. Citizens are known as **Lycoans**.

**MARIAN 1<sup>st</sup> MASSACRE** - An event in Kensillan history that saw the extermination of all devolved humans in Kensilla, including the nobility and royal family.

**ME'LAI** - Lycoan rune for Unbound(unmarried).

**ME'LAINA** - Lycoan rune for Bound(married).

**MENDING** - The term used when an Organic uses their taint to heal a living organism.

**METAMORPHIC STATE** - The physical change a Brutes undergoes when using their Taint. A hybridised state where they appear more predator than human. They can call it on at will in part or whole. Can be externally induced through fear and violence.

**MILITARY CASTE** - One of the Six Castes of Deos. Ranked fifth in society. They are responsible for safeguarding the temples, maintaining order and defending the realm against external threats. They are highly disciplined and loyal to the priesthood. Predominantly Brutes.

**NAVEN** - The highest rank of society in The Republic of Kensilla. Identifiable by the gold brooch they wear. They receive their rank through either military accomplishment or via the possession of Thralls.

**NOMEN** - The lower working class of the Republic of Kensilla. Identifiable by the green brooch they wear. Nomen cannot normally afford the cost to own a Thrall so they lease them from Charter Companies.

**NYAR** - The General of Generals. She is the leader of The Core, the Kensillan Pantheon of Gods.

**OLTISE** - A former kingdom of Idica. It collapsed after the God Fall when their pantheon of gods, The Cardinals usurped power and chose to rule over the entire nation. They are now known as **The Gods Hold**.

**PAZGAR** - One of the five nations of Idica. It is an island nation ruled by seven powerful Devo families who formed The Pazgari

Covenant to rule according to their own laws within their own cities. Citizens are known as **Pazgari**.

**PESAI** - An eyeshield worn in Deos to honour the Celestials. The material and colour dictate one's caste and civic duty. Warriors pesai are painted, whilst others wear sheer fabrics. The highest-ranked citizens wear Fabricant-made silk lace. One must always be carrying it if not wearing it.

**PHYTOTECHNICS** - A skill possessed by Organics whereby they manipulate and control the living cells of plants.

**PREA** - The southernmost region of Idica. Home to the kingdoms of the Prean Union and the Imperial City. Citizens of Prea are known as **Preans**.

**PREAN PROGRESIVISM** - The scientific-based philosophical belief among the Kingdoms of the Prean Union that only through science can humanity progress. Practitioners pay homage to The Engineers, human scientists who aided in their societal progress.

**PREAN UNION** - A confederation of the kingdoms of Prea, formed as a result of The God Fall to protect their borders against those who would blame them for the Fall. All kingdoms retain their sovereignty but are bound by law to the rule of the Emperor.

**PUPPETING** - A Hemopath practice that grants them control over the body of another person, even against their will. Some are skilled enough to puppet an entire group of people.

**RABID** - Brutes who have lost all rational and reasoned thoughts and have grown wild, led only by their predatory instincts. Dangerous. Irreversible.

**RINNISAR (Isle of the Mist)** - The largest mine in Athus, the former God Isle of The Nine. It presided over Prea before the God Fall.

**RUNES** - A component of the Lycoan language. Used ceremonially, particularly as part of their Tattoo culture. Each Rune holds meaning and a reverse.

**RUNNERS** - Collarless passengers of the Kensillan Territory Rail who have sworn an oath to remain on the train and aid the passengers.

**SCHOOL OF GEOMECHANICS** - One of the nine Schools of Engineering. Where students study and create systems to control and manipulate the environment.

**SCHOOL OF HYDROMECHANICS** - One of the nine Schools of Engineering. Where students study the fluids of motion and create technology designed to use water as a fuel and an energy source.

**SERF** - Thralls of the Venerable Militar of the Republic of Kensilla.

**SERVITORS** - The Priests of the Deogn religion of Celestisum.

**SEJA** - The native language of the passengers of the Kensillan Territory Rail. The verbal components incorporate words from Old Prean and Old Kenar. It can also be spoken entirely with hand gestures.

**SETRIA** - One of the five kingdoms of Prea and a member nation of the Prean Union. They are an island ruled by four queens who are subject to the edicts of the Imperial City. They are a matriarchal society with a highly monitored class and marriage system that is extremely ridged over their borders. Citizens are known as **Setrali**.

**SHADOWPORT** - One of the seven major cities of Pazgar. Famous for their black market.

**SHOCKLANCE** - A technological weapon made using Spark electricity. The baton holds a permanent electric charge which will shock those who come into contact with it.

**SPECTRAL** - The term Rieka uses to refer to the visual images she sees when she converses with Tiny.

**STILLED** - A punishment enacted by a god upon a devolved human that makes them unable to use their taint.

**SUL** - The runic chest tattoo that Lycoan men and women receive during their life. It grows as they age due to adding and altering the runes. Only intimate eyes are permitted to see it, but only a Dana may touch it.

**SUMMASAR (Isle of the Rising River)** - A crater in The Republic of Kensilla, where the God Isle of The Core crashed. It presided over Kensilla before the God Fall.

**SUNDERING** - The voluntary act of a devolved human physically or chemically inhibiting their taint. Considered an extremely radical



custom only practiced in Deos. Acts include snipping the webs of fingers and the amputation of wings. One is considered **Sundered**.

**SYN CITY** - One of the seven major cities of Pazgar. Famous for their gambling houses.

**T'EIRYASH (t'eiryashta . plural)** - A term used to refer to devolved humans whose biology doesn't abide by lore. They are considered outcasts due to the unpredictable nature of their taints. They are born with the innate ability to affect the world through the use of Gods' Tongue, causing humans to fear them. The Gods refer to them as "*Mosla mi lushag*", meaning "One who steals from the divine."

**TAHZI** - A tribesmen of the Green Waste of Deos. They are considered heathens by the Celestial Offices since they don't practice Celestisum.

**TAINT** - The gifts that devolved humans possess that make them "other" than human. These gifts were inherited from ancestors who were blessed by a god, and passed down choose.

**TAOM THISTLE** - A plant used in archaic medicine as a blood coagulant. Applied topically.

**TERRA** - Situated between the God's Sphere and the Dark Sphere, this is the realm the gods built for humanity.

**THATCHER'S WART** - A flower that can be used to induce a coma.

**THE BASTION** - Headquarters of the Venerable Council and The Core.

**THE BOROUGH** - A neighbourhood in Aronbok used solely to house the military families of The Celestial Guard of Deos. Similar to terraced houses with internal courtyards.

**THE CANTINA** - A gambling and bar compartment on the Kensillan Territory Rail.

**THE CARDINALS** - The gods and absolute rulers of The Gods Hold. Total power over the nation.

**THE CELESTIAL GUARD** - The armed force that protects Deos, particularly in the capital.

**THE CELESTIAL LIBRARY** - A library inside the Celestial Offices of Deos boasting the most comprehensive collection of books on the

continent. Exclusively used by Servitors and the Scholar Caste. Contains books and audibles

**THE CELESTIAL OFFICES** - The government headquarters for the Ecclesiarchy of Deos. Exclusively made up of the Priesthood.

**THE CELESTIALS** - The twelve gods of Deos. They rule from the Citadel in Aronbok. They represent the 12 major constellations. Each one is known by the golden mask they wear. Worshipers wear eyeshields to emulate them.

**THE CHOSEN** - Blessed of Deos selected to join the Gods in the God Sphere during Ascension. Selected between the ages of 18 - 20, a period known as a Cycle.

**THE CITADEL** - The central complex of the Celestial Offices. Home to the Celestials.

**THE CITY WATCH** - A contingent of the Celestial Guard whose duty is to protect their city. There is a unit in every town and major city of Deos including the capital.

**THE CORE** - The ten Gods of Kensilla. Militaristic. Also known as The God-Kings.

**THE DARK SPHERE** - The afterlife, a place where souls who failed to be raised to the God Sphere as stars go to, forced to serve **VELIAH** in the Necropolis.

**THE DEEP WATERS** - The river of light that runs through the Necropolis. It is the only source of light in the DARK SPHERE and must be collected daily by souls in service to **VELIAH**.

**THE DEVOUT** - One of the Six Castes of Deos. Ranked second in society. They are deeply religious and actively seek the favour of the gods. Considered to have unwavering faith in The Celestials. The Chosen are all members.

**THE DISAVOWED** - Citizens of Deos who have been deemed by the Celestial Offices and by Deogn law as unfaithful to the teachings of the Celestials. Punishment is banishment.

**THE ETERNAL** - One of the Celestials. Represented by the Hourglass constellation. Keeper of Time, Fate and Endings. Only god known to frequent the Dark Sphere. Associated with moths.

**THE GOD FALL** - An event which caused all the God Isles to fall from the sky and crash. After which the Gods ruled in person.

**THE GOD ISLES** - The former homes of the various pantheons. The five islands once floated in the God Sphere before falling to the earth during The God Fall.

**THE GODS HOLD** - The easternmost nation of Idica, neighbouring The Hetra and Halinon. It is ruled in totality by The Cardinals. The population is majority Devolved Human. They are in a constant state of war with **Halinon**. Humans are a minority species.

**THE GOD SPHERE** - Everything from the sky to the heavens. The realm of the gods and the former location of the God Isles. Belongs to the Gods.

**THE GREEN WASTE** - A vast grassland in the centre of Deos, home to the wandering Tahzi tribes.

**THE HETRA** - The tundra that surrounds the border of the arctic north. Home to the Kanahari.

**THE IMPERATOR** - An elected position, created by the Prean Union for a time when all the kingdoms of Prea should unite to protect the region. The Emperor serves a life term and resides in the Imperial City.

**THE IMPERIAL CITY** - A sovereign city-state, ruled by the Prean Emperor. A dangerous city.

**THE NINE** - The former Prean Pantheon. They disappeared after the God Fall. Believed to have lost their power during the rise of Prean Progressivism and now wander Prea disguised as humans.

**THE OLD MAN'S HEARTH** - The Inn where Rieka worked as a baker. Owned by Engar.

**THE PRIMES** - The former Gods of Pazgar.

**THE RED GUARD** - The personal guard of the current serving the Emperor. Made up entirely of Hemopaths.

**THE SCHOOLS OF ENGINEERING** - The nine Prean schools of science, founded by the Nine Engineers who served to further Prea's societal progress.

**THE SHADOW WEAVER** - One of the Celestials. Represented by the Skull constellation. Keeper of Secrets and Master of Transformation. Believed to be the god who bestowed humans in Deos with the ability to wield blood.

**THE TORPOR** - A state that occurs when a Kindling exhausts their heat production or absorption capabilities and falls into a deep sleep state. Its purpose is to allow their body to heal. Time unconscious is dependent on the extent they used their taint.

**THE VENERABLE COUNCIL** - The leadership of The Republic of Kensilla. Made up of Military Generals and Admirals from the Army, Navy and Air Corps. Each one serves as the voice of a particular member of The Core.

**THE VENERABLE MILITAR** - The military of The Republic of Kensilla. Army, Navy and Air Corps. Made up of humans and devoserfs.

**THE WHITE** - The arctic north of Idica. Made up of ice and snow.

**THRALL** - Slaves of the Republic of Kensilla. Made up entirely of Devolved Humans.

**TORBERRIES** - A purple berry used to make wine and as an ingredient in pies.

**TORVAR** - One of the five kingdoms of Prea and a member nation of the Prean Union. They are a Diarchy, ruled by a King in the north and a Queen in the south of the Peninsular Nation. Their main technical advances are Hydromechanically based. Citizens are known as **Torvians**.

**TOXICANT VAPOUR** - The aerosol chemical some toxicants can produce. Predominantly extracted from Charmers and Voids.

**TRAILMEN** - Travellers of the safe paths through The Green Waste. They do so in wagons pulled by bio-engineered oxen.

**TREASURED ONE** - The voice of the Gods of Deos. A member of The Chosen who is awarded for their pure devotion to the Gods and ascends to the God Sphere as an Astral.

**VELIAH** - The Goddess of The Dark Sphere. Rules from the Necropolis. Rules over the souls of the dead.

**VOID TRAPS** - Mechanisms built using the chemicals produced by Void Toxicants, which are used to trap, capture and inhibit a devolved human from using their taint. Popular in the Republic of Kensilla.

**WORSHIP SQUARE** - A central gathering place situated outside the Citadel in the Deogn Capital of Aronbok, where citizens spread

news of righteous achievements and immoral ones. Considered part of one's daily activities.

## GODS' TONGUE

***Gaakriik*** - (noun) - Spell. (English translation)

***Gaakriikta*** - (plural) - Spells

***Rinnisar*** - (proper noun) - Isle of Mist.

***Summasar*** - (proper noun) - Isle of the Rising River.

***T'eiryash*** - (noun) - from *t'ei*, "knowledge, power, magic" and *ryash*, "speaker." In English the equivalent is *witch*.

***T'eiryashta*** - (plural) - Witches.

***Mogya fyaak*** - (term) - One who shares a soul, mate.

***Mogya*** - (noun) - Mate.

***Mosla mi lushag*** - (term) - One who steals from the divine.

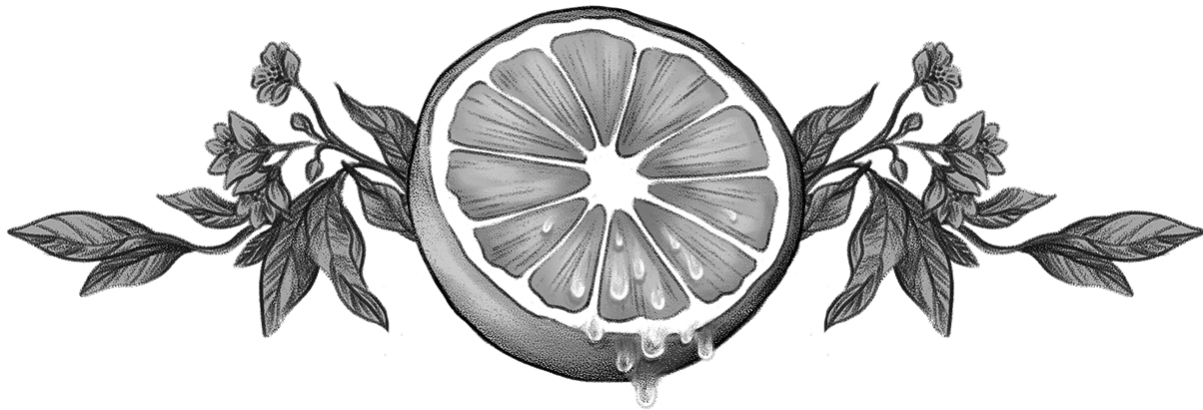
## SPELLS

***Atraagniyai*** - to summon a scone to oneself.

***Arkagaffai*** - to make oneself invisible.

***Shueikhai*** - to immobilize someone else (directed at someone who is not the speaker)

***Akarfenmraakshai*** - to teleport oneself to Carfen's Pass.



## CHARACTERS

### **Alvera**

*A Collector in the Venerated Army of Kensilla*

### **Amida**

*A Runner aboard the Kensillan Territory Rail. A Slyph Brute. Member of the Kensillan Resistance. Wife to Jordry and close friend of Rhydian.*

### **Anika**

*A Runner aboard the Kensillan Territory Rail. An Echo Brute with unusual white wings. Member of the Kensillan Resistance.*

### **Anton Nicora**

*Father to Rieka. A Member of the Celestial Guard. Captain of the City Watch of the Deogn Capital of Aronbok. An Apex Brute. Wolf-Blessed.*

### **Bennic**

*A prisoner on the Kensillan Territory Rail and one of Rieka's bunkmates. Boarded alongside Rieka.*

### **Ceroy**



*A female Medic in the Venerated Army of Kensilla. Works with Thralls.*

**Costin**

*A Member of the Kensillan Resistance.*

**Eleen**

*Rhydian's oldest friend. A Current and a collared member of the Kensillan Resistance. Treats Rieka with animosity when they first meet.*

**Emil Kal**

*One of Rieka's bunkmates. A Deogn of the Artisan Caste and a Smith.*

**Engar**

*Owner of the Old Man's Hearth in Keltjar in The Hetra. He hired Rieka to work and bake in the inn for the last six months. He is a Swine-Blessed Terrestrial Brute*

**Eydis Kanyk**

*Mother of Rhydian and Lily, daughter of Kosha Kanyk. A Hemopath and prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail. Currently a Liminal.*

**Farox Benhairo**

*A Drake from Torvar. Rieka's bunkmate and a prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail.*

**Filora**

*Ground leader in the Kensillan Resistance. A Pneumatic. Mother to Jordry and former best friend of Eydis Kanyk*

**Frey**

*A fifteen-year-old boy on the Kensillan Territory Rail. Collarless Kindling. Has a crush on Tira.*

**Gala**

*Wade's twenty-one-year-old sister. A Kindling and Runner on the Kensillan Territory Rail.*

**Ghena**

*An eight-year-old Wolf-Blessed Brute on the Kensillan Territory Rail. Is fascinated by Rieka.*

**Henric**

*Rhydian and Lily's deceased father. Husband of Eydis Kanyk.*

**Hentirion Ignati**

*Rieka's bunkmate. A Scholar's Assistant for The Great Library who was captured on a research mission and made a prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail. He is a Kindling.*

**Jae Erendai**

*Husband to Lily and expectant father. A Human prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail, collared at the age of 8. A Kanahari convert.*

**Jonah**

*One of Rhydian's close friends, born on the Kensillan Territory Rail and a member of the Kensillan Resistance. He is a Bear-Blessed Brute.*

**Jordry**

*One of Rhydian's close friends and a member of the Kensillan Territory Rail. He is an Alchemist and married to Amida.*

**Kodee**

*A medic in the Venerated Army of the Kensillan Republic. An Organic.*

**Kosha**

*Rhydian's grandfather. Member of the Kensillan Territory Rail Council. A Hemopath.*

**Krisenya Tenamai**

*A Fox-Blessed Terrestrial and a member of the Kanahari Nation of The Hetra. She is Rieka's closest friend and was to be her guide crossing The Hetra to reach the Preat Union. Her brother is Taren. Also known as Kris.*

**Leon Arnow**

*Rieka's ex-lover. He travelled with her for several months to reach The Hetra. She left him to take a job at The Old Man's Hearth. He spent the last six months at Farbor Ice Mines. He has conflicted feelings about her.*

**Lera**

*A Skin Weaver Fabricant. One of the Runners of the Kensillan Territory Rail and a member of the Kensillan Resistance. Her twin brother is Lex.*

**Lex**

*A Skin Weaver Fabricant. One of the Runners of the Kensillan Territory Rail and a member of the Kensillan Resistance. His twin*

*sister is Lera.*

**Liliya Erendai**

*Rhydian's younger pregnant sister and granddaughter to Kosha. She is a Runner on the Kensillan Territory Rail and a member of the Kensillan Resistance. She is married to Jae Erendai.*

**Malden**

*A Bear-Blessed Brute. One of the Runners of the Kensillan Territory Rail and a member of the Kensillan Resistance. Married to Si'mon.*

**Malori Nicora**

*Rieka's mother. A member of the Devout Caste of Deos. A Sundered Talon Brute. She is a baker and taught Rieka.*

**Oric**

*A Kindling and member of the Kensillan Resistance.*

**Orion**

*A member of the Citadel Watch of Aronbok. Close to Rieka.*

**Rozal**

*A lieutenant in the Venerated Navy of the Republic of Kensilla. Has an encounter with Rhydian.*

**S'vara Xaiaren**

*A Wolf-Blessed ship rigger from the maritime city of Igran on the border of Lycoa and Torvar. Rieka's bunkmate and a prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail.*

**Salryah**

*The only medic on the Kensillan Territory Rail. The only Organic on board. She is a Runner and is in a relationship with Wade. She is Blind. Also known as Sal.*

**Saska**

*A Pazgari prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail. Rieka's bunkmate. A sundered Slyph and suspected member of one of the cartels of the Pazgari Covenant.*

**Si'mon**

*A Talon with rainbow wings. One of the Runners of the Kensillan Territory Rail and a member of the Kensillan Resistance. In a relationship with Malden.*

**Taren Tenamai**

*A Talon member of the Kanahari Nation of The Hetra. A close friend of Rieka. Taught her to hunt whilst she was in The Hetra. His sister is Krisenya.*

**Tiny**

*Rieka's wolf companion since she was five. Calls him "old man".*

**Tir'tana (Tira)**

*A fifteen-year-old antlered Terrestrial from the Enibon Islands. Rieka's bunkmate and a prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail. Stuck in her Meta State due to trauma.*

**Tomas**

*A Charmer and prisoner of the Kensillan Territory Rail, Train Justice.*

**Vasia**

*A Novitiate Priestess of Deos known to Rieka*

**Wade**

*A Pneumatic. One of the Runners of the Kensillan Territory Rail and a member of the Kensillan Resistance. In a relationship with Salryah.*

## CALENDAR

### WEEKDAY

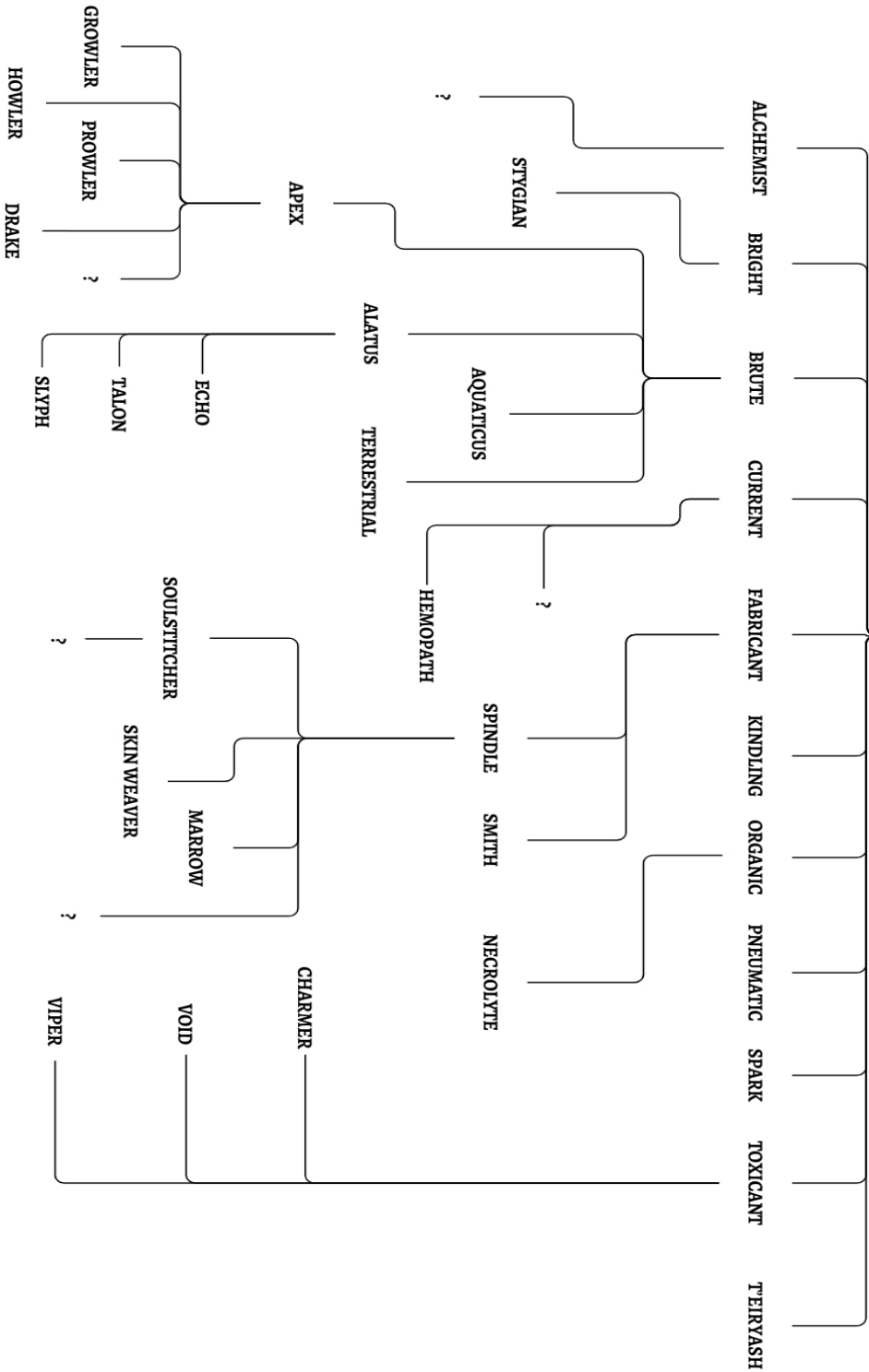
Auroris  
Solaris  
Lunaris  
Stellaris  
Mechanis  
Temporis  
Illuminara

### MONTHS

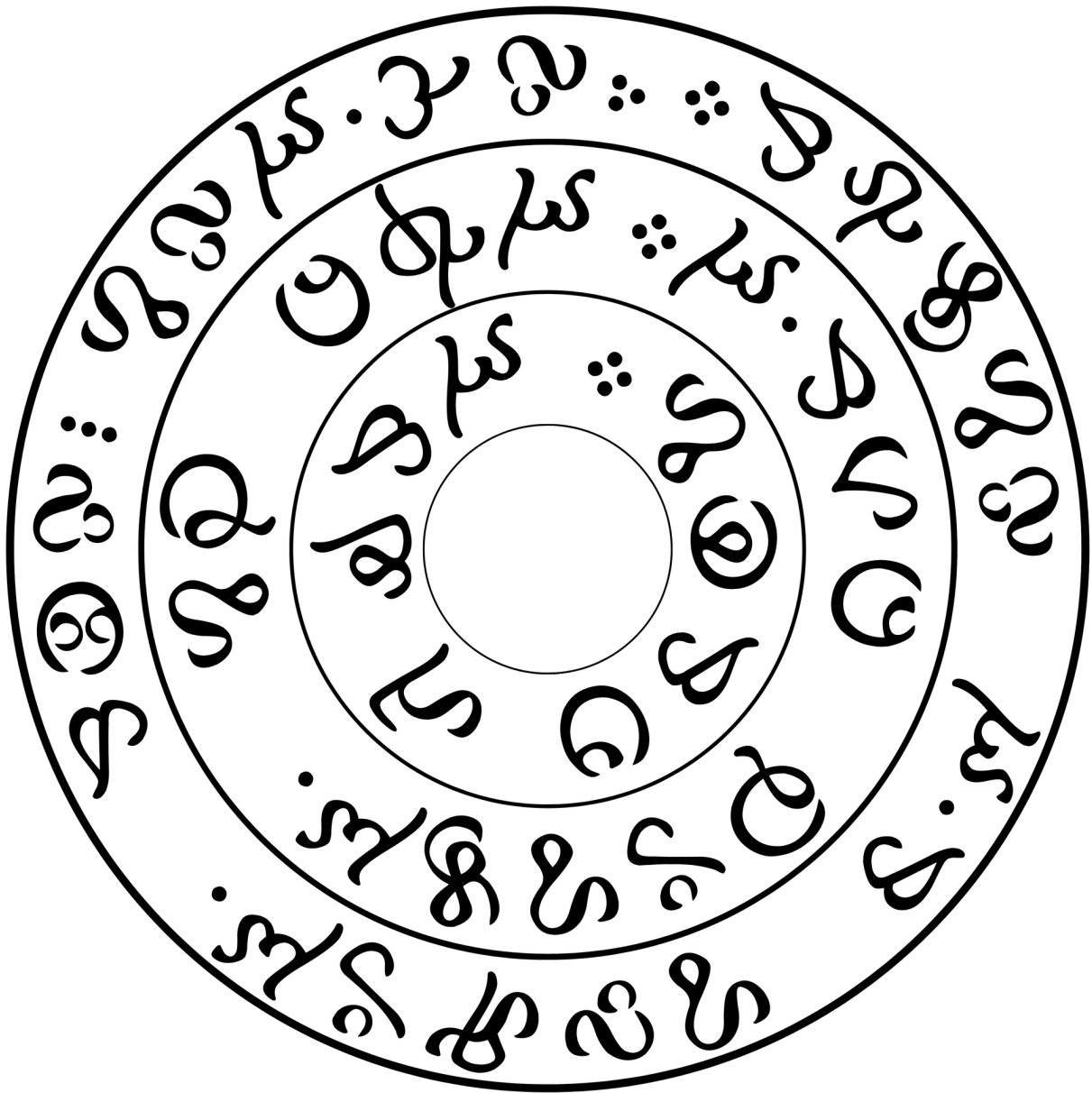
Kartian  
Marian  
New Bloom  
Ormian  
Isian  
Solstice  
Rexian  
Xhanian  
Harvest  
Leeian  
Ellian  
Frostfall

THE GODS

According to The Schools of Engineering in The Prean Union, the following tree in the understood relationship between the Taints of The Gods and their derivations.

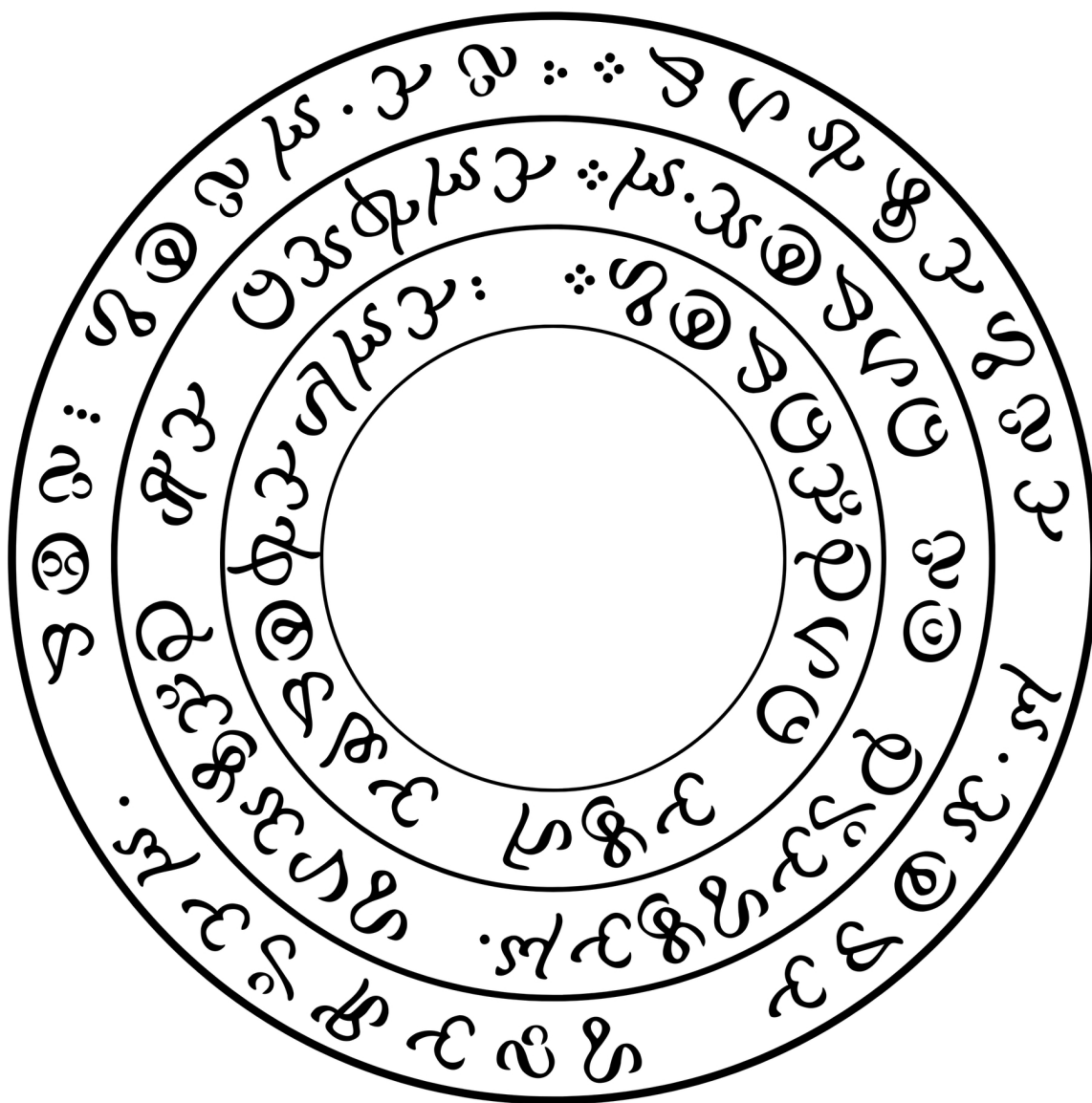


## THE CODE



*Incomplete Code*





*Read clockwise or rotated anti-clockwise from the inner circle first*

" Vimlaagol ark afmishagta, t'eimol nu gyavrat' voeraag  
kha leshta mohravna t'eima vnakhyat' muun. Vint'an? "

"I am the absence of constraints, the ability to choose yet not all who seek me can truly have me. What am I?"





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"What if Cinderella was a boy, how would the story change?" I never would have thought that one single writing prompt would culminate in the world of Ravenous. And at first it didn't. I took that idea and created a Victorian Alternate Universe where these genderswapped retellings could take place, but whilst the characters desperately wanted to live, the Victorian era was determined every idea I had would be snuffed out. I blame the female inheritance laws.

At the time I had been heavily worldbuilding another universe when I realised what these characters really needed was the same thing, a world of their own, and Mr. Cinderella soon became just one of many genderswapped tales that just had to be shared with the world. Eventually I came to realise that another story had to be told before Cinderella and that was that of the Resistance Fighting Red Riding Hood and his Big Bad Wolf-Blessed wife. So I should probably thank those who helped me bring it to life.

My readers. Thank you taking a chance on me and my book. Your love for Ravenous and its characters has been so unexpected, it still doesn't feel real. Thank you for making my author dream a reality.

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Joy. Your kindness over the years has been a blessing. Thank you for supporting me on this journey.

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To Mum. Thank you for putting up with my rambling two-hour car rides to the coast so I could brainstorm plots, even if it made no sense to you. Thank you for cheering with me when those talks resulted in writer's block breakthroughs. When I needed a sounding board you were always there. Without your constant support these last few years, I wouldn't be here today, calling myself a Self Published Author.

And to Dad who I will happily blame for my obsession with all things fantasy. I did it. I kept my promise.

## ABOUT AUTHOR



Alana Rachel Parker is a romantic fantasy author who wrote her first book whilst she was supposed to be studying for university exams. She writes stories about characters whose flaws don't define them, and who strive for independence and love in worlds full of magic, monsters, war and the occasional animal companion.

As a self proclaimed nerd, she grew up with an over active imagination, telling herself stories before she even knew writing could be a profession. Now she spends her time bringing those stories to life as a proud world builder.

When she isn't writing, she is collecting teapots, indulging in her latest TV show obsession, debating the merits of the slow burn villain in literature and manifesting her books on the New York Times Best Seller List.

She lives in rural Southern Queensland where she intends to build her dream library.